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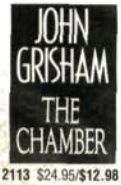

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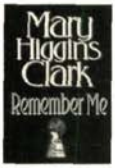

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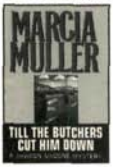

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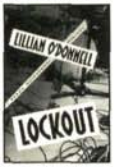

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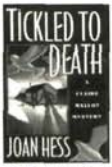

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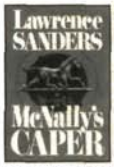

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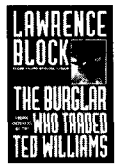

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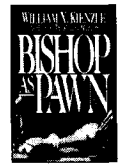

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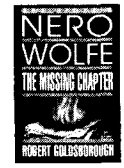

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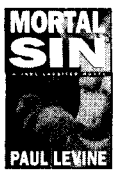

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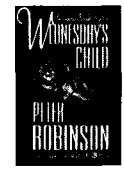

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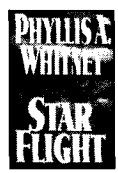

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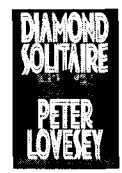

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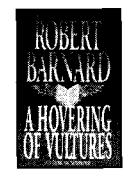

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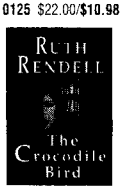

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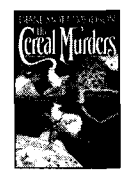

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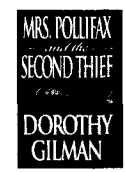

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Cover Illustration by
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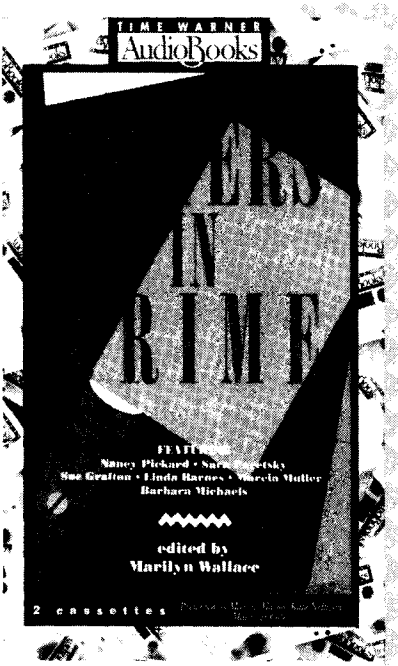

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In the summer of 1993, Barbara Callahan and her husband had the good fortune to spend two weeks in Ireland. The following story was inspired by the gorgeous scenery and delightful people they encountered in their travels . . .

THE MISTS OF BALLYCLOUGH

by BARBARA CALLAHAN

Receiving a newspaper clipping about an acquaintance who has achieved celebrity status can either brighten the day or darken it, depending on one's feelings for the person in his pre-fame days. When I opened the envelope postmarked Ballyclough, Republic of Ireland and read the article inside it, my day darkened. The clipping was sent to me by Margaret Loughlin, a policewoman I had met sixteen years ago when I was twelve years old and summered in Ireland with my Aunt Ellen and cousin Mairead. Featured on the first page of the literary supplement of the *Monitor* was Desmond O'Connor, author of the bestselling novel *Dreams of the Druid.* I met Desmond the same summer I met Margaret. I have never forgotten him. Neither has Margaret.

Desmond was staying at the next house over from Aunt Ellen's bed-and-breakfast in Ballyclough in the west of Ireland. His hosts, an elderly couple named Flynn, encouraged their fourteen-year-old guest to spend time with the young people at Aunt Ellen's house. Before I arrived from the States for my summer visit, Desmond had practically become a member of the family, calling himself "cousin by adoption" to Mairead, who wrote me about him.

"Mother says that Desmond is startlingly handsome. I'm not sure I agree with her. He's got black hair and black eyes and I prefer redheads. Mother also says that he looks like the reincarnation of one of Grace O'Malley's pirates. She hopes Desmond doesn't have the black heart of a pirate, though. I don't think he does. He's very funny."

It seems fitting that Desmond became a novelist. That summer in Ballyclough he made up stories about everyone—passersby on the

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road leading to the strand, folk singers at the Cliffs of Mohr, and the monk who founded St. Theobald's Abbey. Vividly, I remember him nudging me when an old turf farmer, Seamus Brennan, approached us on the road past Aunt Ellen's bed-and-breakfast.

Desmond whispered, "He's a defrocked priest, you know. He consorted with witches at midnight on the eve of Allhallows in the ruins of St. Theobald's Abbey. The bishop found out because one of the witches, Bridey Maguire, later confessed to him. Witching is a sin that can only be forgiven by a bishop. Of course, Bridey had to name names and she named Seamus Brennan as the chief consorter. Consorting is a desperate bad sin, especially for a priest, so he was immediately defrocked."

Although Aunt Ellen had warned us about Desmond's "storifying," as she put it, we wide-eyed kids shivered delightedly as Desmond tipped his cap at Seamus Brennan and wished him good day. Consorting sounded like one of the sins that made Sister Aurelia blush when she taught catechism. Hearing the word flow so glibly from Desmond's lips deepened our awe of him. It never occurred to us to ask Desmond, who was as new to the region as I was, to reveal his sources.

Desmond storified me on our first meeting at Shannon Airport when he accompanied Aunt Ellen to pick me up. Exhilarated by my first flight and anticipating the two-month stay in Ireland with my widowed aunt and a cousin the same age as I, whom I had met two years before in the States, I tried hard to keep my American-Irish skin from betraying my excitement. The flush, however, the bane of redheads, flared up in spite of my efforts. Aunt Ellen hugged me warmly and so did Mairead, my elder by three days.

When they introduced Desmond, he stepped back and bowed. "Greetings, Deirdre from America, namesake of our famous mythological character, Deirdre of the Sorrows. But I don't see you as a wretched being weighed down by sorrows. No, I see you as an astronaut, hurtling through space, always searching for the joys of the future, always looking to the morrow. Yes, you are definitely Deirdre of the Morrows."

Instead of blushing more deeply, I felt my skin cool down. Desmond's analysis of me had the calming effect of a fortuneteller's prediction of good things. Instantly, I was under his spell. He was not a pirate but a Gypsy empowered to read silent thoughts. I secretly dreamed I would be a pioneer female space traveler. It was not until the end of the summer when I had slipped away from Desmond's

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thrall that I learned he had read my earnest letters to Mairead, filled with my fascination with NASA's activities.

After Desmond's greeting, Aunt Ellen rolled her eyes and grinned at me. "Desmond, love, please get us a trolley so we can put Deirdre's bags in the car." As Desmond hastened to perform that mundane task, Aunt Ellen filled me in. "He's not really a relative of ours, but Mairead kind of adopted him because he's the great-great-nephew of the Flynns who live the next farm over. They're in their eighties now, God love them, a wee bit dotty, and glad for the company. Since Mairead has always called the Flynns Auntie and Uncle, that made Desmond an unofficial cousin. I don't know all the details that brought Desmond into our lives, but according to him, his parents are both actors touring Australia this summer."

"I wonder why he didn't go with them," I said.

"Oh, I can tell you that," Mairead answered. In a Desmond-like voice, she intoned, "I didn't want to go down under with the folks because I'm keen on doing historical research, and what better place to do it than at the ruins of St. Theobald's Abbey, dating back to eleven nineteen A.D. and only one kilometer away from the Flynns'."

"That will do, Mairead," Aunt Ellen chided, but with a smile tugging at her lips. Mairead's Desmond imitation was really quite good. "We do, however, have another visitor who's staying with us this summer, Deirdre," she said. "I didn't want to write your mother about him because I was afraid she wouldn't let you come, thinking we'd be too crowded, which we're not. His name is Finbar and he's just turned thirteen."

Something was not quite right about the way Aunt Ellen mentioned the other visitor. Her voice quivered a bit and she looked away. Mairead took my arm and chatted about my letters as Desmond opened the car doors for us.

"I believe I heard you mention Finbar, Aunt Ellen," Desmond commented as she maneuvered the car out of the airport car park. "Have you told Deirdre about the wee tragic lad?"

"No, Desmond," Aunt Ellen snapped. "That can wait."

It waited until after lunch, at which the mysterious Finbar was not present, when Aunt Ellen shooed me upstairs for a rest. As I closed the door to my room, Desmond jumped in front of me, putting a finger to his lips.

"Shh, Deirdre, don't make any noise. I have to tell you something. Aunt Ellen can't talk about Finbar yet without getting desperately

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weepy. But you must know about him before you meet him. Here, sit on the bed and I'll take the chair."

Desmond commanded obedience, and I sat meekly on the bed.

"It's a sad story, love, but I think you can bear it."

I nodded my resolve.

"Finbar came down here a month ago. Practically speechless, he was. Barely could say hello. Traumatized, he was."

"Traumatized?"

"It's a word, love, that means he saw something so horrible that he went out of his senses. He went catatonic for a few days, too."

"Catatonic?"

"Oh, sorry. Catatonic means what he saw made him climb inside himself. Didn't respond to any outside prodding. Could stick a pin in his toes, you could, and he wouldn't even move."

I shivered. "What happened to make him traumatized and catatonic?"

"Arms and legs, Deirdre. Arms and legs shooting up in the air. Blood showering down from the skies and spattering his face. Brains gushing onto his jacket. Arms, legs, blood, and brains of people he was queued next to waiting for the bus in Belfast."

Desmond added a few more details that I blocked out to keep from losing my lunch. "What happened?" I finally croaked.

He gave me his patented Desmond look, the first of many I received that summer: arched left eyebrow, flicker of a smile, stark pity for one so uninformed.

"Maybe it hasn't been on the American telly, Deirdre, or if it has maybe you've been busy watching other things. But there's terrible troubles up in the north of Ireland. Those that want to stay with England and those that don't are having a go at each other. First it was just marches and rock throwing, and bombing statues and power stations, but lately it's been bombs where people are. A car carrying a bomb exploded directly next to the bus queue where Finbar stood."

"Oh," I said quietly, visualizing arms and legs torn from their owners, leaving torsos bouncing on the ground until they and heads exploded into fragments of flesh and bone. Aunt Ellen's potato and leek soup churned in my stomach.

Desmond tilted his head back, rather enjoying, I thought, my discomfort. I tried hard to look unaffected, but beads of sweat formed over my upper lip.

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Having delivered me the shock of my young lifetime, Desmond grinned, patted my shoulder, then climbed out the window and leapt two stories into the soft dirt of the yard. It was an exit worthy of Errol Flynn, my mother's favorite swashbuckling movie star. I lay sleepless on the bed, projecting the terrible images of dismembered bodies onto the wall. Suddenly I bolted upright. Could Desmond have been lying? Could he have been storifying Finbar as Aunt Ellen had warned?

When I met Finbar at afternoon tea, I knew Desmond had told the truth. His skin was gray, the gray of Play-Doh when you mix all the colors together. His body was soft and pudgy, like an oversized toddler's, but his face, though unwrinkled, was old, like the death masks on the effigies I later saw in St. Theobald's Abbey.

Finbar came to Aunt Ellen's because his parents were also in the bus queue that day, a detail most likely related to me by Desmond when my mind had ceased to absorb more horror. When a police-woman came to him, Mairead told me, Finbar was sitting on the curb, clasping the severed arm of his mother. Finbar's mother was Aunt Ellen's best friend, a Catholic like her, who had left Ballyclough to marry a Protestant and settle in Northern Ireland. Her family disowned her, but they welcomed the orphan after the death of their daughter. Finbar's psychiatrist, however, believed the boy would do better for a time with Aunt Ellen, who had kept in touch with Finbar and his mother throughout the years.

After my first week at Ballyclough, I joined in the routine of the household because my mother had made it clear to Aunt Ellen and me that I was not to be treated like one of the guests at the B & B. Like Mairead, I helped with the chores, which were clearing the breakfast dishes and washing and drying them, and hoovering the guest rooms.

Finbar also had chores, but they were animal-based. He had to feed the russet setter, occasionally groom him, and also escort back home the cows that frequently strayed from Gallaher's pasture. Mairead and I could never tell from his face if he liked these chores, but we thought he did because we often found him outside sitting with the dog, deriving some kind of comfort from stroking its fur. Each weekday morning about nine his Uncle Brendan came to the B & B and drove Finbar to a psychiatrist in Kilmeath.

Mairead's and my communication with Finbar was limited to polite queries, such as, "Isn't it a nice day today, Finbar?" To which he solemnly answered yes without meeting our eyes. Mairead and

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I vowed that we'd make him smile before the summer was done, but Desmond beat us to it.

Every afternoon after Finbar's Uncle Brendan dropped him off, Desmond appeared, bringing treats for the dog, who had collapsed in the yard from the exertion of wildly welcoming Finbar home. Finbar settled on the grass beside the dog, waiting dutifully, it seemed, for the arrival of Desmond the Dramatic. Sometimes Desmond entered the yard by the low stone wall that separated the B & B from the Flynns', carrying a pole and mimicking a tipsy trapeze artist. Sometimes he snatched a towel from Aunt Ellen's clothesline. Appropriately caped, he feinted and lunged on the imaginary parapet of the stone wall, dueling and triumphing over invisible opponents.

Mairead and I were his best audience. We laughed and applauded at all the right places. Finbar watched silently but did respond to Desmond's post-performance greetings, delivered in the dialect *du jour*. To "Och, mon, how goes it?", Finbar replied, "Fine, thank you." To *"Bonjour, Monsieur Finbar, comment ça va?"* Finbar replied "Fine, thank you." Undaunted by Finbar's reticence, Desmond plopped down beside him on the grass and addressed Shamrock, the Irish setter.

Narrowing his eyes, Desmond stared accusingly at the beast. "Reprobate! Cur! I know who you are. You have passed through many lifetimes. Your sorry mother helped you, Sham O'Rock, to betray kings! You were there, at Clontarf on Dublin Bay in the year of Our Lord ten fourteen when the forces of Brian Boru, King of Munster, battled the Danes for control of Ireland. Too frail to lead battle, Brian lay in his tent, awaiting news with you there as his watchdog. When the Dane Brodar approached his tent, you properly growled until the nefarious Brodar slipped you something, something for which you forfeited your duty and abetted the journey of Brian Boru to his eternal reward!"

During the tirade, Shamrock's head sank lower and lower until it rested on the damp earth in as clear a posture of shame as I have ever seen.

"He understands you," I squealed.

"Of course he does. And now, Finbar, you may ask what Brodar the Nefarious gave to Sham O'Rock."

"But I know what Brodar gave Shamrock, Desmond," Finbar said, his eyes coming alive for the first time since I'd met him.

"And pray, what is that, friend of the treacherous Sham O'Rock?"

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"Well, Brodar was a Dane, so it must have been Danish pastry."

Mairead and I howled with laughter at Finbar's answer and howled even louder when we saw Desmond's face set in the forlorn expression of the one-upped. Finbar looked pleased, then worried. Obviously he didn't want to offend Desmond. Sighing, Desmond patted his shoulder and said, "Touché, my man." Later in the day, Desmond told us that he would have accepted any answer from "the wee tragic lad who badly needed a win."

The Sham O'Rock incident gave Finbar a lift. Since he could hold his own with Desmond, he agreed to accompany us on afternoon excursions planned by Desmond as long as Shamrock came along. Aunt Ellen and Finbar's Uncle Brendan were very pleased. Our first outing was to a beehive hut of corbeled stone, set on a hill midway between the B & B and the Cliffs of Dun Maurgis. Although the climb was steep, Finbar gamely followed the leader, stopping occasionally to admonish Shamrock for barking at the sheep that dotted the hill. When we reached the hut, Desmond extended his arm, *signaling us to stop.*

Frightened, I clutched Mairead as I wondered if a mad old hermit would come out of the hut, long white hair and beard flowing, calling down deprecations from heaven for our intrusion into his solitude. From his pocket, Desmond pulled out a piece of soda bread and a juice glass filled with salt. Solemnly, he broke the bread into smaller pieces and gave us each a chunk.

"Within this hut," he intoned, "dwelled Jeremiah the Just, holy recluse of Ballyclough, who spent his days in prayer within this mortarless dwelling, fashioned by his own hands. Constantly besieged by devils to leave this holy place and tempted to consort by lady devils wearing no clothes, Jeremiah refused and prayed only harder. He remained here until the age of ninety-seven, and was lovingly carried down this hill by the monks of St. Theobald's Abbey to be buried there."

"Then why the bread, Desmond?" asked Mairead. "If Jeremiah the Just is gone, who needs it? Henry the Hungry?"

Finbar and I smiled weakly, worried that Mairead's sarcasm would somehow call forth lingering devils.

Desmond frowned. "Do not mock, Mairead. Since Jeremiah's departure, evil spirits have squatted here, waiting for souls less worthy to enter. I have carefully researched spirit infestation in medieval tomes and learned how to ward them off. Our ancestors developed a simple ritual to be followed before entering hovel or

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castle. Take a piece of this bread and dip it into this container of salt, then eat it."

As we obediently ate the salted bread, Desmond plucked four blades of grass and arranged them in his hand.

"A variation on choosing straws," he said. "The person who picks the shortest blade goes into the beehive hut first."

I shivered. The exterior of the hut with its lichen-covered stones appeared not out of place atop a hillside bearing masses of eons-old rock. Several wildflowers growing out of mortarless niches gave the hut an almost homey look. But the sun-deprived interior, entered by a small opening in the rocks, could offer only dungeonlike hospitality.

When none of us approached Desmond's outstretched hand, he tossed the blades of grass into the air and looked at us with contempt. "I'll be the first, then, as usual," he announced. Before he could move toward the hut, Finbar pushed him aside. "No, Desmond. I will be the first."

Mairead and I exchanged surprised glances. Desmond, however, slapped him on the shoulder—a man-to-man gesture, the lieutenant congratulating the timid recruit turned volunteer. As Finbar made his way up the slight incline leading to the hut, Shamrock tugged at the cuffs of his pants. Finbar gently shook him off.

"Be gone, Sham O'Rock. Your master is not the cowardly cur that you are," thundered Desmond.

Finbar looked so proud. He straightened his shoulders and continued his march to the door of the hut. As he stooped to enter it, he turned and grinned at us. I think he sensed that Mairead and I were afraid for him. At that moment, I understood that Finbar had come to realize that nothing he encountered in the hut could be as horrible as what he had experienced in the Belfast queue. Fear was no longer his master.

It seemed like an hour before Finbar came out of the hut, but I'm sure it was only a few minutes. Bearing trophies, he crawled outside, a dead bat perched jauntily on his tweed cap, an empty pint of Guinness in one hand, and a half dozen Fry candy wrappers in the other.

"Ah, my fellow pilgrims," he shouted, "I had to fight twenty devils themselves for these relics, but I won, I won!"

Ah yes, you won, Finbar. You completed your rite of passage from darkness into light. You won Desmond's respect and Mairead's and my deepest affection. We were no longer afraid of you or for you.

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Your Play-Doh complexion turned into that rosy Irish glow, your boyhood returned, at least for a while.

Finbar's visits to the doctor in Kilmeath dwindled to once a week, a session most likely devoted to his relating tales from "The Adventures of the Four Cousins," Desmond's Holmesian title for our excursions. Some of our adventures occurred on the Aran Islands, where Desmond marched us over the rock-strewn terrain as "defenders of the fort of Dun Aegnus, once again under siege." Our ascent in double-time to the fort almost dislodged many of the tourists, who descended the narrow path at a leisurely pace, unaware of the "struggles" above.

We scrambled up the Cliffs of Mohr in great haste before edging ourselves out to the farthest rocks where we could blend in with the German tourists who sat in silent wonder at the sea lapping gently at the limestone cliffs.

"Sorry, cousins, that I had to rush you up the cliffs but I spotted potential trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

"Spurned lovers' revenge."

Feeling a story coming on, Finbar grinned and lay back on the rocks. Mairead and I smirked, but gave Desmond our full attention. Spurned lovers were welcome additions to Desmond's repertoire.

Desmond told us that the two young women, one playing a small accordion and the other a guitar, at the foot of the path leading to the cliffs, did not come there each week for the coins tossed into their box by tourists. Maeve and Fiona, their names somehow known by Desmond, came to the cliffs looking for their lovers who had met two American girls and subsequently emigrated. Maeve and Fiona knew, however, that the treacherous lads would return one day to gaze longingly at the Cliffs of Mohr. When that occurred, the two had devised a plan to toss the men over the cliffs.

"So what made you think Maeve and Fiona will send their lads flying today?" asked Mairead.

"Elementary, my dear Mairead. I noticed that their rendition of 'The Fields of Athenry' became quite agitato when the two young men in front of us passed by them."

Finbar rolled over on his stomach and squinted at Desmond. "My dear Holmes," he said, "could it be that the agitato came from the fact that the two lads winked at them and pointed to their watches, which I deduced meant that they wanted to know what time Maeve and Fiona would finish playing so that they could have a date?"

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At Finbar's riposte, Desmond turned glacial. How dare the peasant poach on the territory of the master! Abruptly, he left the rock and swept regally down the path, never looking backwards at us or sidewards at the two musicians. Finbar turned pale and chewed on his lip. Mairead and I wanted to console him, but we were not quite sure what Finbar's offense was. The sin of upstaging the star was something we were not acquainted with.

All the way home in the motor coach, Desmond stared out the window. Certain that Desmond had checked out of our lives, Mairead whispered to me, "It's going to be bleak without him."

During the next two days, unrelenting rain added to the bleakness. Finbar, Mairead, and I had just about exhausted Aunt Ellen's supply of games when we heard a tap on the parlor window.

Finbar's face when he saw Desmond at the window warmed us more than the return of the sun. "I knew he'd come back," he yelled as he dashed to the front door. Finbar must have sensed that the life of a star without an audience was even bleaker than ours.

"Sorry to have been out of touch," Desmond said, "but I've been indentured for the past two days."

"How so?" asked Mairead as Finbar stood by beaming like a child whose punishment has been mercifully remitted.

"The Flynns, those dotty old dears, have finally sold their dress shop in Kilmeath. The buyer is going to turn it into a betting parlor so he's got no need for the mirrors, curtains, mannequins, hangers, and all the other accoutrements of the former Fashions de Beauté. For some reason, auld lang syne, I suppose, the Flynns had me fill up their spare room with the junk. For two days, I've been desperately wet, hauling cargo in the mud like a wretched convict at Botany Bay."

"I would have helped you, Desmond," said Finbar.

"Of course you would have, lad, and the girls too, but the Flynns are very noblesse oblige and all that."

Noblesse oblige, whatever that meant, I didn't care. What mattered was that Mairead, Finbar, and I had received mass absolution. Finbar had been forgiven for de-storifying Desmond's "Tale of the Two Jilted Musicians" and Mairead and I pardoned for not shunning the sinner. Having been fully reinstated into Desmond's good graces, we were now ready for our next adventure.

"It's about time we investigated St. Theobald's Abbey," Desmond announced. "Legend has it that the place is haunted."

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Finbar and I shivered delightedly, but Mairead bit her lip to hold back a smile. Later she told me that there had never been a local legend that St. Theobald's was haunted, but she didn't want to be guilty of de-storification and incur the displeasure of Desmond.

The ruin of St. Theobald's Abbey was one of the area's most interesting but least visited attractions because of its location atop a rock-strewn hill accessible only by a steep footpath. We set out to visit it on a drizzly summer afternoon in weather that the Irish call "soft." A roofless limestone chapel in various stages of decay remained standing. It had once been quite beautiful and still retained some semblance of loveliness. As we came close to the ruin, Desmond assumed the role of tour guide.

"In eleven nineteen, Eammon of Ennisbowden, descendant on his mother's side from the Viking, Olaf the Unruly, fled to this very spot to avoid being drawn and quartered for his many crimes. Though a noble by birth, Eammon was a scoundrel by choice. He changed his name to Theobald because he was on the run for being a poacher, a horse thief, a despoiler of virgins, a part-time pirate, and most heinously of all, a necromancer."

Pausing more for effect than to catch his breath like the rest of us, Desmond waited until Finbar asked the proper question.

"What's a necromancer, Des?"

Desmond timed his response to coincide with our arrival at a scattering of Celtic crosses almost obscured by high weeds and grasses that marked the burial places of St. Theobald's monks. "A necromancer is a sorcerer who predicts the future by communicating with the dead."

As Desmond led the way to the east wall of the chapel, Mairead whispered, "Blarney. St. Theobald's was founded by a saintly monk named Theobald, a nobleman who gave most of his riches to the poor and saved just enough to pay the stonemasons to build the abbey. Only the chapel remains now."

Although the roof of the chapel had disappeared, the four walls remained intact. As I walked under the Romanesque arch into the nave of the building, the sense of having entered a holy place overwhelmed me. As Mairead, Finbar, and Desmond scampered over the stones of the floor, their native Irishness making them more familiar with the venerable, I made the sign of the cross before reverently touching the stone wall. I had never touched workmanship that was centuries old.

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For several minutes, I tried to absorb the sense of the place, to visualize long-dead abbots and priests seated on the chipped sedilia during mass, to hear the sounds of the "Dies Irae" being sung as the abbot's coffin, also long gone, was placed into the empty sarcophagus on whose sides were carved ribbonlike spirals, symbols of eternity. When Mairead began to play her tin whistle, I fully believed that I had willed the music of centuries to sound once more just for us. The plaintive notes from her simple instrument sent a sweet greeting to the monks and their benefactors who were interred within the chapel. I felt connected to everyone, living and dead.

"In a trance, are you, Deirdre?" shouted Desmond.

His voice shattered the moment. "Come look at this, will you." He stood high above us on a narrow stone walk. "I'm up here in the scriptorium, the place where the monks did their homework, copied books and all that."

We climbed up crumbling steps, made for smaller feet than ours, onto the remains of the scriptorium, and inched over to the west wall. I was so careful of my footing that I hadn't noticed Finbar's pallor until we reached Desmond.

"Seen the ghost of Eammon of Ennisbowden, Finbar?" asked Desmond. "Or is it the height that's made you go ashy?"

"Neither one," I snapped. "He's just naturally pale."

Desmond smiled, then pointed to the arch over the niche in the wall.

"There are the heads," he said, "of the stonemasons who built this chapel. They always carved likenesses of themselves somewhere in the edifices they built. Here's my favorite."

The face that he chose leered at us. Unlike the other small jovial heads that could have graced jesters' wands, Desmond's favorite, with its full lips and dilated nostrils, could have decorated the lintel of a brothel.

"O, stonemason of yesteryear, where are you now?" he intoned. "In hell, with the other despoilers, I should guess. Sizzling for your sins, I suppose, you despoiler of all despoilers. Are you roasting with Eammon of Ennisbowden, who built this place so he wouldn't be hanged?"

"Desmond, shh," Mairead urged. "This is a holy place."

"Afraid I'll call up the demons, are you, love? And well you should be, because demons historically lurk around chapels, peddling temptations to the pure. Demons of Ballyclough, unite!"

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"Blasphemy, Desmond," cried Mairead as she crossed herself and climbed down from the scriptorium. Finbar and I followed. The sacred mood broken, we went outside and started down the hill. Finbar kept turning around, looking for Desmond, torn between adulation of the older boy and his ingrained piety. When Desmond caught up with us, full of penitent phrases, Finbar instantly forgave him. Mairead and I made him work for our forgiveness, not participating in his capers for two days.

We gave in after Finbar begged us to come to the Flynns' backyard. On his knees on the low stone wall, Desmond bowed low, then raised his head so we could see the ashes smeared across his face and the sackcloth wrapped around his neck.

"Father O'Reilly says I must soil me face and put the cloth around me neck till I receive the pardon of two fair maidens."

The two fair maidens burst into laughter as the penitent crossed his eyes in the telling.

"Actually, I only got three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys, so how blasphemous could I have been?"

If Father O'Reilly absolved him, how could we not forgive him? The four of us resumed our adventures, but limited them to the strand. Much of the time it was too cold to swim, but not too cold to listen to the pirate tales that Desmond made up. Finbar never got bored with the stories, but Mairead and I finally did. We frequently went off by ourselves to St. Theobald's, where we confessed to each other that we were afraid of Desmond ever since he had invoked the demons.

It was in the middle of August that the foursome really split up. At first, Finbar asked us politely to join Desmond and him on a Desmond-inspired treasure hunt, an imaginary archaeological dig, or a real ride in a curragh with a local fisherman. Whenever we declined, he never seemed disappointed. We knew he liked having Desmond to himself.

The adults in our lives that summer, Aunt Ellen and Finbar's Uncle Brendan, radiated joy at Finbar's recovery. His Uncle Brendan practically glowed the day he told Aunt Ellen that Finbar's psychiatrist thought the boy didn't need him anymore and that he'd be able to attend school in Kilmeath in September.

"I understand that Desmond will be going to school with him," Aunt Ellen said. "He told me today that his parents are off to South America with their theater troupe and he'll stay here for at least a term."

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"It will be good for the boys to be together," Finbar's Uncle Brendan said. "In fact, if you don't mind, we'd like Finbar to finish the summer with you so as not to disrupt his friendships with Mairead and Deirdre, and, of course, Desmond, with him being the next farm over."

"Of course," answered Aunt Ellen. "We love having him."

The prospect of attending school with Desmond thrilled Finbar. He started riding Aunt Ellen's old bike to strengthen his legs so he could ride with Desmond the four miles to school in Kilmeath. When he had mastered the bike, he planned a trial ride to Kilmeath. Aunt Ellen didn't want him to go, but Mairead and I coaxed her into approving.

The Finbar that returned three hours later was so subdued that Mairead and I were sure that he'd run over someone's pet or knocked over an outdoor fruit stand. When we asked him how his ride went, he answered not very convincingly, "Lovely." Strapped to the bike's handlebars was a packet of newspapers, and some more were piled in a basket in back. Before we could ask him about the papers, Desmond appeared.

"Hail to the conquering hero. You made it. And what have you here? The newspapers took your picture, did they?"

Finbar brushed Desmond's hand away from the basket and smiled shyly. "No, it's just that the *Monitor* has some pictures of soccer players that I want to send to my friends in Belfast."

"The Flynns get the *Monitor,* don't they, Desmond?" Mairead asked. "Maybe you could give the paper to Finbar when they've finished."

"Would love to, but dotty Mrs. Flynn wrapped fish in it before I could even read my horoscope. Heaven knows what will befall me today because I surely don't."

Finbar excused himself and carried the newspapers up to his room. When he refused my offer to help, I was relieved because I felt achy and feverish. Aunt Ellen had come outside to welcome Finbar home, but focused more on my flushed cheeks.

"The summer flu, the very worst kind. To bed with you now, and I'll bring you up my remedies."

Fever dreams are the worst. I dreamed I was drowning in a tureen of tomato soup and just when I thought I was done for the soup turned into newspapers. While I was trying to climb out of the newspapers, President Kennedy and his brother Robert, looking exactly like the picture on the wall in Aunt Ellen's dining room,

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hoisted me out of the paper ocean and sat me on the window sill of my first-floor bedroom where I heard a really eerie, dream conversation.

Somebody was telling somebody that tonight was Sorcerer's Solstice, the one night in the year when the necromancer, Eammon of Ennisbowden, allows one soul to return from the dead to visit with a living relative. But the relative had to be brave enough to go by himself to a burial place like, say, St. Theobald's Abbey, at midnight, armed only with a flashlight, and stand before the sarcophagus in the chapel. If he followed those instructions, his worthiness would be assured and the deceased would visit him.

The tomato soup washed over me again, then stained the walls of my bedroom. After another dose of Aunt Ellen's remedies, the redness disappeared and so did the voice in the yard. I slept soundly until I heard different voices, voices shrill with panic—Aunt Ellen's and Finbar's Uncle Brendan's. I heard Aunt Ellen say that Finbar wasn't in his room, that he must have gone out during the night.

At noon they called the *garda*. A pretty young policewoman, Margaret Loughlin, came to the house and took his description. She tried to soothe Aunt Ellen, who kept pacing back and forth until she saw me in the hall and apologized for not checking on my condition.

"I'm okay, Aunt Ellen," I reassured her, "my fever's gone. But I had the strangest dream. And maybe Finbar had it too. In the dream a voice said it was time to go to St. Theobald's Abbey to speak to a dead relative. Maybe Finbar didn't realize it was only a dream and went there, maybe to see his mother."

"Dear saints in heaven," Aunt Ellen moaned, "maybe the lad did go there. Maybe he hasn't been as well as we thought."

"We'll check the abbey, miss," Margaret said.

Finbar's Uncle Brendan carried him back to our house, thinking perhaps the sight of familiar faces would revive him, but it didn't. Uncle Brendan and Margaret found Finbar lying motionless on the stones of the chapel in front of the empty sarcophagus. He had been there quite awhile and was not only catatonic, but suffering from exposure to the cool night air. His face looked as if a stonemason had chiseled it into a permanent expression of horror. When Desmond came in to see Finbar before the ambulance came, he wept.

"The poor lad," Desmond sobbed. "What could have possessed him to go off in the night to the abbey?"

No one had an answer to his question, except me, and I was too embarrassed to say, "The Sorcerer's Solstice possessed him," because

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after all, it was only a dream, and a fever dream at that. And my fever might not have been fully gone because when I looked at Desmond as he held the door for the paramedics, I saw that his face had assumed the characteristics of the leering stonemason at St. Theobald's chapel.

During the first week, we clung to the hope that Finbar would awaken from his paralyzed state, but he didn't. On her own time, Margaret Loughlin visited us, probing gently into our lives that summer, trying to penetrate the mist that shrouded the night Finbar went to the abbey. No foul play had been determined, she assured us. The *garda* had concluded that an excitable, vulnerable boy for reasons unknown had gone to a deserted place late at night and become terrified at being there.

"Had you ever made a dare with each other," Margaret asked Mairead and me, "to go to the mysterious abbey at night?" We truthfully answered no. Margaret also wondered about my dream. She told me there were instances of people having the same dream, like I thought Finbar and I might have had, but they were extremely rare. Could I have heard a real conversation, she wondered. I smiled sadly.

"Since the Kennedy brothers were in my dream too, I don't think I heard a real voice talking about St. Theobald's."

On her afternoon off on my last week in Ireland, Margaret cycled by to say goodbye. As she walked through the front gate, she met Uncle Brendan, who was carrying Finbar's clothes to the car. I was behind him loaded down with all the newspapers Finbar had bought in Kilmeath. When Margaret asked about them, I explained that Finbar was going to send pictures of soccer players to his friends and I wanted Uncle Brendan to have them to give to Finbar when he woke up.

"I don't think he'll need them, love," Uncle Brendan said gently. "The doctors say he won't come out of this one."

"When did he buy the papers?" Margaret asked.

"On the day he went ill," I told her.

Before I put the papers in the trash, Margaret took the one on top. It wasn't until ten years later when I was doing graduate work in psychology at the university in Galway, that I found out what was in the newspaper. When I learned that Margaret was lecturing in forensics at the university, I looked her up, and we've been friends ever since, united by our concern for Finbar.

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"There were no pictures of soccer players in the newspaper that day," she told me, "but there was a feature article on the front page about people who had informed on the activities of the I.R.A. and been executed by them. The photograph of a very handsome man caught my eye, as it must have Finbar's when he was in Kilmeath. The man, who had been shot three months before the article had appeared, was an older version of Desmond and was also named Desmond O'Connor."

"Desmond's father," I exclaimed, "was an informer!"

"Yes."

"Then his father was never an actor in Australia and South America like Desmond told us. But what about his mother?"

"I did some checking and learned that she died when Desmond was three. After his father's death, Desmond was spared life in an orphanage when he remembered the Flynns and contacted them. They became his legal guardians."

"So Finbar found out the truth about Desmond when he cycled to Kilmeath and bought a newspaper."

"Yes, and I think Desmond believed that Finbar was going to circulate the newspapers in school and ruin his standing with his classmates," Margaret added, "because even in the Republic, no one loves an informer or his kin."

But Finbar wouldn't have done that, I told Margaret. He idolized Desmond. So why, I wondered, did he buy all those papers.

"Oh, I think I know," Margaret said sadly. "He bought the newspapers in the futile hope that he could keep potential classmates from seeing the article and remembering the photo when Desmond arrived. After all, it was only two weeks until school started. Finbar bought the newspapers to protect Desmond."

Margaret and I lingered over tea for quite a while, each of us parting the curtain of memory to face once again the pain of that summer. Margaret had been a policewoman less than a year when she met us. Finbar had been the first child victim she had encountered and he moved her deeply. She had never been satisfied with the conclusion that no foul play had occurred. Over the years, just like Mairead and I had, she checked on Finbar's condition, which never changed.

"If only he could have told us what happened," I mused.

"Oh, I think I know what happened," Margaret said.

I put my scone down slowly and stared at her. The cafeteria, almost empty, had become quiet except for the rain beating against

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the windows. Margaret looked away from me toward the windows, but I knew she was not checking the weather. She was gathering strength to relate the horrible.

"From the start, your dream of Eammon of Ennisbowden and the abbey disturbed me. I didn't think it was a dream. I thought you overheard a real conversation involving Finbar and someone encouraging him to go to the abbey. After talking to your Aunt Ellen and learning how Finbar worshiped Desmond, I was convinced that Finbar would only go to the abbey at midnight if someone he trusted like Desmond told him to. Desmond was desperately afraid that Finbar was going to pass the newspapers around school and he contrived a plan to stop him."

Her eyes narrowed. "And the little beast almost succeeded."

"What was the plan, Margaret?"

"Quite simply, Desmond intended to scare him to death. Finbar didn't die, but Desmond was satisfied because catatonia, a living death, essentially eliminated Finbar as an imagined threat."

Outside, the wind keened for Finbar.

"What happened at the abbey, Margaret?"

"To find out, I walked circles around the abbey whenever I had a chance that fall. And I found two things that showed me what Desmond had done, but I could never prove they triggered the catatonia."

"What were they?"

"An arm and a paper wrapper."

I shivered. "An arm?"

"A mannequin's arm. I found it about a quarter mile from the abbey in a thicket of gorse. The wrapper I found inside the chapel in a holy water font. It had covered a firecracker and Desmond must have forgotten to retrieve it. The arm he dropped on his way home."

"What did Desmond do with them?"

"He used them to restage the event that had initially traumatized Finbar, the bombing death of his parents. Here's what I think happened. Desmond went to the chapel ahead of Finbar and climbed into the sarcophagus and concealed himself. When he heard Finbar, he tossed a firecracker up in the air to simulate the light and noise of a bomb. Then he threw out the items he had placed on top of himself, the body parts of a dismembered mannequin."

"Oh my God."

"And Finbar once again saw his mother mutilated by the bomb, just as he had in the bus queue."

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For several minutes we sat in silence until, for sanity's sake, my mind shifted from the horrible scene to the technical details of the crime.

"The mannequin. The Flynns had sold their dress shop and Desmond helped bring the contents of the store, which included mannequins, to their house. Did you ever question the Flynns?"

"Oh, yes, but by the time I discovered the arm and found out from your Aunt Ellen what the Flynns' business was, Desmond had convinced the old couple to sell everything to a junk dealer, so there was no way I could check for a mannequin with a missing arm. As for firecrackers, they could be bought in Kilmeath. I asked storekeepers there but no one remembered a lad matching Desmond's description buying them. The firecrackers could have been at the Flynns' before he came there."

For two years, Margaret followed Desmond's career. He did well at the school in Kilmeath, acting in school plays and graduating at the top of his class. To Margaret's knowledge, no one at the school held his father's past against him, which would certainly have pleased Finbar. After high school, he moved on to Trinity College and from there, Margaret lost his trail.

Until two weeks ago. On a Sunday afternoon, Margaret opened the *Monitor*'s literary section and saw Desmond proudly signing copies of his book in a shop on Grafton Street in Dublin. The buyer of the book, a young woman, looked adoringly at the author, who was movie-star handsome. Margaret sent me the article, with a paragraph highlighted in yellow marker that noted that Desmond would be in New York at the Benton Book Store on Madison Avenue on November fifth, a week from the day I received the article. She had attached a Post-it to the piece that read, "World at his feet, eh?"

I went to Benton's Book Store and stood in line with about one hundred other purchasers of *Dreams of the Druid,* almost all women, who offered him the kind of irrational attention usually reserved for rock stars. Whenever Desmond finished signing and smiled at the recipient of his largesse, a collective squeal erupted from the line. When I got close to him, I studied his face for signs that some of life's events, particularly his crime against Finbar, had caused him anguish, but nothing registered on that flawless face but the sheen of self-love. I knew I could change that.

When I reached the front of the line, I said, "Please sign the book, 'To Deirdre of the Morrows.' "

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He began to write, then slapped his wrist against his forehead and clasped my hand. The line went wild with envy.

"Oh my God, it's you. The American cousin. How long has it been? Fifteen, sixteen years. Why, you've turned into a beauty. Married, of course?"

"No, I'm married to my work."

He kissed my hand. "And what might that be, fair lady?"

"Psychology, I'm a research psychologist."

"And vat is it that vomen vant?" he said, puffing on an imaginary cigar.

"Just autographs."

I handed him another copy of his book.

"Please sign this, 'To Finbar.' "

A flicker of anxiety, but just a flicker, crossed those beautiful features.

"You don't mean our Finbar, do you, the wee tragic lad?"

"Yes, I do."

"But the poor lad's irreversibly catatonic. I used to inquire regularly about him."

I smiled beatifically. "In the past few years great strides have been made. New medications and therapy have done wonders. Because of personal and professional interest, I've kept in touch with his condition. He might be completely cured within the year and his memory will return. He's been transferred to a hospital in the States. I don't know where. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Oh, it's lovely, quite lovely," Desmond said.

Quickly, he scribbled "To Finbar" on my book, then wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"Not feeling too well," he told the store manager as he lurched from the desk and made his way past the disappointed crowd into the street. I followed him out and watched as he headed for the nearest bar. The world might be at his feet, as Margaret said, but the past was thudding against his head. It wouldn't do at all for the world to know the truth about its latest darling when the wee tragic lad came to and told his story.

But the wee tragic lad will never tell his story. He died six months ago in Ireland. I made up the part about his apparent recovery and sojourn in a hospital in the States. Since I am sure that Desmond will go looking for Finbar, I wanted to give the famous author the vast expanse of this country for his futile search. The deception won't bring Finbar back, but perhaps a crease or two might furrow the brow of the Bard of Ballyclough. ●

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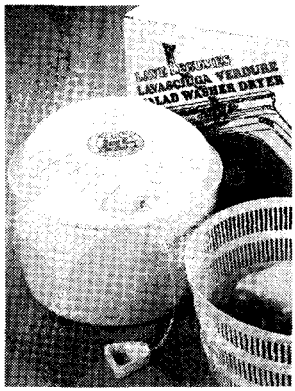

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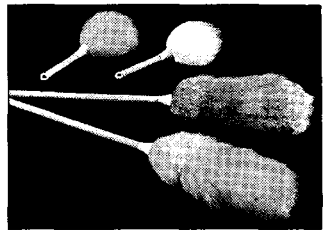

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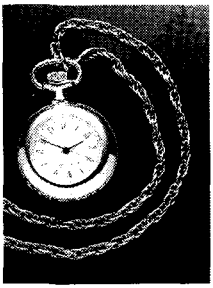

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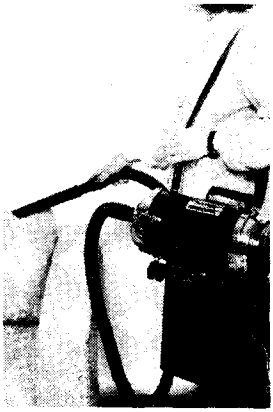

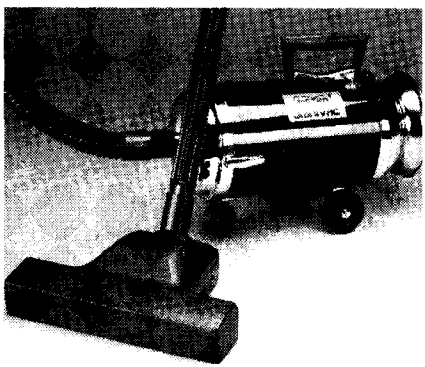

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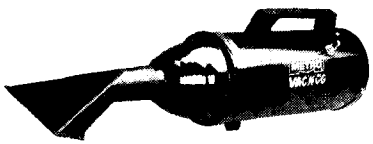

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A contributing editor for Field & Stream *magazine, William Tapply is well known to mystery readers as the author of twelve novels featuring lawyer-sleuth Brady Coyne.* EQMM *is proud to present here Brady's first appearance in a short story, in a case involving a most irascible client . . .*

MAC'S GAMBIT

by WILLIAM G. TAPPLY

I slid the cassette into the VCR, then sat on the sofa. I pressed the Play button on the remote and lit a cigarette. After a moment of static, Mac O'Neil's face appeared on the screen. His eyes looked smudged as they glittered out of the dark caves of their sockets. His skin was translucent and stretched tight over his skull. A little fuzz showed on his scalp, but his eyebrows had not grown back.

He was seated behind a chessboard grinning at me. "Good morning, Brady Coyne," he said into the camera. "Happy second anniversary of my death. Yes, my friend and trusted attorney, it has been two years since my rather timely demise. Two years since your last visit, when I flummoxed you with my new gambit. Allow me to enlighten you."

On that March afternoon two years, one week, and a few days earlier, I parked in the circular peastone drive and stepped out of my car. The wind came sharp and damp and cold. It blew grains of frozen sand off the tops of the dunes and laid the sere marsh grass flat. It had, over the years, bent and twisted the scrubby pines so that they looked like troops of crippled old men limping across the sandy landscape.

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From Mac's hilltop, the Atlantic was a nasty gray ribbon in the distance beyond the ever-shifting dunes. The rest of Chatham, out there on the exposed elbow of Cape Cod, was being blown and washed into the sea. But Mac O'Neil's rambling silver-shingled mansion nestled securely among the hills a mile or so from the erosive vagaries of tide and storm.

I mounted the steps and rang the doorbell. Inside I heard it chime the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth, a moment later the door swung open and Lenore Watson's round face was grinning at me. "Ah, Mr. Coyne," she said. "Come in, come in. 'Tis bitter out there, eh?"

"It's cruel, all right, Lennie," I said, stepping in. "But seeing you warms the very cockles of my heart."

"Ah, you devil," she said, smiling.

"Whatever cockles are," I said. "Do you know?"

Lennie put her palm to her cheek and pretended to blush. "Now don't be talkin' dirty to an old lady, Mr. Coyne. Here, now. Give me your jacket and you go on out there to the solarium. Himself's waitin' at his chessboard for you. You'll have some coffee, eh?"

"Yes, coffee, please, Lennie." I handed her my jacket. "How's he doing?" I said.

"He's holding his own," she said. "His pills seem to control his pain. He still puts in four hours every morning at his writing machine and on temperate days he takes his afternoon walk. He sleeps and eats." She shrugged. "He says he's got plenty of good days left in him and he doesn't intend to waste them being an invalid and feeling sorry for himself."

I nodded. "That sounds like Mac." I hesitated. "Any news from Eileen?"

Lennie's mouth tightened. "Himself seems resigned to the fact that she ain't coming back." She bent close to me and whispered, "It's for the best, I say. Best for both of 'em." Then she stepped back and smiled again. "You go on, now. He'll be happy to see you. I'll fetch your coffee."

The housekeeper hung my jacket in the closet and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. I walked through the big living room, with its floor-to-ceiling shelves of books and leather furniture, and out into the glass solarium with its 180-degree hilltop view of the dunes and the sea.

Mac was seated at his chess table with his back to me. His cane hung over the back of his chair. Without turning, he lifted his hand

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and waved me in. "Come, sit, Brady," he said. "I want to show you something."

I took the seat opposite him and reached across the chessboard to shake his bony hand. "How're you feeling, Mac?" I said.

"A damnsite better'n I look."

"You look better than last time I saw you."

"Eyebrows," he said. "Without eyebrows, a man looks like a damn corpse. Last time you saw me I'd just finished the treatments. I've gained nine pounds since then." He rubbed the top of his head. "A little fur up here. Just wish to hell the eyebrows'd grow back."

Before the cancer, Mac O'Neil had been a big handsome man. He and Eileen Doyle made a striking couple. Mac had written and directed the *Steamer Stanley* television mystery series that held the Tuesday nine o'clock slot on CBS for three years. Eileen had played the sexy, tough-talking cabdriver, Steamer's love interest. The marriage of Mac and Eileen had set the TV community abuzz mainly because, at seventy, he was exactly twice her age.

Everyone assumed she wanted his money and power and he wanted her youth and beauty, which was the standard bargain out there. No one seriously considered the possibility that they might have actually loved each other.

Soon after the wedding they discovered Mac's prostate cancer. He came to Boston for the operation, and afterwards he and Eileen retired to his summer place in Chatham.

On the recommendation of one of my wealthy old clients, Mac had retained me to revamp his will and restructure his estate in accordance with the peculiar laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and his new sense of his own mortality. We quickly became friends. I spent an afternoon with him once a month. On nice days we sat outside and walked through his gardens. On days such as this one we stayed inside. We played chess, ate the suppers that Lennie prepared, and sometimes we even did business.

Mac continued to write, and Eileen seemed content to grow flowers and buy clothes and sailboats. She and Mac seemed genuinely fond of each other. She tolerated his moods and they played some tennis and golf together. I had the vague feeling that Eileen thought of me as an enemy, perhaps because the bulk of Mac's estate—his rambling house on the hill and his collection of letters, manuscripts, films, and old television memorabilia—was to be converted to a museum upon his death, although we had set aside an even million for Mac's widow.

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Then they found lumps in Mac's neck. They told him there was no operation. He had more chemo and they gave him a couple of years.

Mac was an irascible old curmudgeon even on his good days, but Eileen hung in there, although increasingly she seemed to be away more than she was home with him. Then, only a couple of weeks earlier, she abruptly announced that she was going back to L.A. to pick up her acting career.

This was my first visit with Mac since Eileen had left him.

Lennie came in bearing a tray that held a cup of black coffee, a glass of water, and a big mug. She set the coffee by my elbow, then held the tray for Mac. "Pill time," she said to him.

He reached into the mug and plucked out a big green-and-white capsule. He tilted back his head, dropped the capsule into his mouth, and swallowed it with his water. I watched his Adam's apple jerk in his thin throat.

"Anything else, boys?" said Lennie.

Mac reached up and patted her cheek. "We're fine," he said.

Lennie left the room. Mac leaned over the chessboard. "Watch this, Brady," he said.

"Wait," I said. "How come you get the first move?"

"Because I want to show you this opening." He moved a knight's pawn, then sat back and grinned.

"I've seen that," I said. I lit a cigarette, took a sip of coffee, then countered with my king's pawn.

Mac brought out a bishop.

"Oh," I said. I stared at the board. "Hm."

"I asked her to stay with me until I died," he said as I pondered my move. "I told her if she didn't I'd cut her off."

"Is that why I'm here?" I said. "To cut Eileen off?"

He grinned. "Nah. You're not here as my lawyer. Not today. Today you're here as my chess victim."

"It'll take awhile to alter your will, Mac," I said.

"The doctors say I've got some time. I'll wait her out. Eileen's not stupid. Greedy, maybe. But not stupid." He shook his head. "She's cohabiting with a bloody jeweler, Brady. Can you believe it? Some guy who helped costume my show. You'd think at least it'd be one of the rich young pretty boys, a Costner or a Quaid or a Gibson."

"Those guys're happily married, I understand," I said.

"Sure," said Mac. "So was Eileen."

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Before long Mac had doubled my pawns, prevented me from castling by forcing me to move my king, and swapped a bishop and a knight for my queen. I tipped over my king. "Conceded," I said.

He leaned back and grinned. "Clever, eh?"

"Reckless," I said. "I should've castled when I had the chance. Then my knights would've eaten up those pawns of yours."

"Oh, really?" he said.

So we played again. But he had different options for my defense, and although I managed to prolong the game, he eventually nailed my queen and mated me on the twenty-second move.

Afterwards we moved into Mac's den. A fire was blazing in the fireplace, and Mac and I sat close to it sipping the Bloody Marys Lennie brought us. "It's not so bad," he said, gazing into the orange flames, "knowing you're going to die. I always knew it, of course. But now I really believe it." He glanced at me with a quick smile. "It adds a certain zest to life, you know?"

I nodded.

He studied the fire. "I guess there'd be pain without the pills, and I suppose eventually the pills won't do the trick. But for now I can still think straight, so I can't complain."

"If your chess game is any measure of it," I said, "you are thinking very straight indeed."

"You bet I am," he said. "Matter of fact, I'm working on a new project. Very complex. Maybe my best ever."

"Another Steamer mystery?"

He waved his hand vaguely. "I guess you'd call it a mystery."

"Do you have time—?" I started to blurt.

He grinned. "To finish it before I die?" He nodded. "Absolutely. Guaranteed. It's about done. You'll see. You're gonna love it."

Lennie made a thick lobster stew for supper, and Mac walked me to the door a little after nine that evening. As I slipped into my jacket, he pressed a package into my hand. It was wrapped in brown paper. An envelope was taped to the outside of it.

"What's this?" I said.

"A piece of my new project," he said. "There are instructions for you in the envelope."

"Instructions?"

He nodded. "Read them later. You're my lawyer. You're obliged to follow them."

I shrugged. "Sure," I said.

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When I got back to my apartment that night after the long drive from Chatham to Boston, I opened the envelope. It read: "I entrust this to Brady Coyne, Esq., my attorney. Keep it safe and open it two years after my death."

I chuckled. Just like Mac. Always creating mysteries.

The next day I put the parcel, still wrapped in its brown paper, into my office safe.

A little more than a week after my visit with Mac, I was in my office staring out the window at the gray sky and dreaming about the imminent opening of the trout season when Julie buzzed me.

"There's a Ms. Kilgore on line two," she said.

"First name?"

"Just Ms. Kilgore, she says."

"Do I know her?"

"Nope," she said.

"What's she want?"

"She wants to talk to you, Brady," she said. "Jeez."

"Okay, boss," I said. I punched the blinking light on my telephone console and said, "Ms. Kilgore?"

"Assistant District Attorney Karen Kilgore," came a pleasant female voice. "Barnstable County D.A.'s office. You are MacArthur O'Neil's attorney, am I right?"

"Yes, that's right. What—?"

"He's dead, Mr. Coyne."

"When?"

"Night before last."

I slouched back in my chair. "Damn," I said. "He figured he had another couple of good years. He'd just finished a round of chemotherapy." Then I said, "Wait a minute. You're with the D.A.'s office?"

"Yes."

"I don't get it."

"It was an unattended death, Mr. Coyne. Medical examiner's case."

"Sure, but . . ."

"He was poisoned."

"Suicide, you think?"

"Maybe. There are questions."

I found myself shaking my head. "Not Mac. I saw him a week ago. He was full of enthusiasm. He had a new project going. We played chess. He beat the pants off me twice. Mac would never . . ."

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"There will be an inquest tomorrow, Mr. Coyne," said Kilgore. "You were his attorney and, I believe, one of the last people to see him alive. I'd like you to attend."

"I'll be there," I said.

The indictment came down two weeks later. Eileen Rose O'Neil, who had flown back to Massachusetts when she was informed of Mac's death, thereby saving the Commonwealth from the paperwork of arranging her extradition from California, was arrested and charged with murder in the second degree.

The trial began on the first Monday in August.

Assistant District Attorney Karen Kilgore handled the prosecution. Her first witness was the Barnstable County medical examiner, who testified that he had examined O'Neil's body at his home on the morning of March twenty-third. Preliminary examination suggested death by natural causes, but the postmortem analysis indicated that death had been caused by potassium cyanide poisoning. Traces of a gelatin capsule were found in the victim's stomach. Laboratory tests confirmed that the cyanide had been contained in the capsule.

"Cyanide, Doctor?" said the A.D.A. "Tell the jury about cyanide."

"Potassium cyanide," he said, "is a colorless solid, a deadly poison. As little as a three-hundred-milligram dose is absolutely lethal. It's a common industrial chemical, used in solution for electroplating and for the extraction of silver and gold, primarily."

"In jewelry making, for example?"

"Yes, in the jewelry industry."

"What can you tell us about how MacArthur O'Neil died?"

"Oh, very painfully, without question," he said. "Almost immediately upon swallowing the cyanide he experienced tachycardia—that's a sudden rapid increase in the heart rate—and dizziness. Then came intense head pain and nausea. Soon he lapsed into a coma. Within fifteen minutes—no more—he was dead."

"In your opinion, Doctor," said Kilgore, "is this the kind of death a knowledgeable person would choose?"

"Knowledgeable?"

"About cyanide. Someone such as MacArthur O'Neil, who wrote mysteries and was an expert on murder and death."

"Nobody," said the M.E., "would voluntarily die by potassium cyanide poisoning."

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The A.D.A. showed him a scrap of paper. "Did you find this by his body?" she asked.

He looked at it. "Yes. This is it."

"Read it please."

"Eileen . . . the pills," he read. He looked up. "That's all it says."

The next witness, a handwriting expert, testified that the writing on the note conformed to that of MacArthur O'Neil, although the note appeared to have been hastily scribbled.

"As if he were in distress when he wrote it?" asked the prosecutor. "In your professional opinion."

"Yes," said the witness. "As if he were in distress."

A forensic expert from the state police laboratory testified that he had lifted several partial fingerprints from the large mug that contained the victim's capsules. He identified those prints as belonging to the housekeeper, Lenore Watson, the deceased, MacArthur O'Neil, and the accused, Eileen Rose O'Neil. He further testified that the mug contained twenty-eight capsules, none of which contained potassium cyanide, but that microscopic traces of the poison were found on the outside of seven of the capsules.

A medical doctor testified that he had been MacArthur O'Neil's regular physician, that he had attended him during his recuperation from surgery for prostate cancer, that he had discovered the lumps on the victim's neck that resulted in the diagnosis that the cancer had invaded his lymph glands, and that he had continued to attend O'Neil after the chemotherapy. He had prescribed the medication, which the victim purchased in containers of one hundred capsules and took once every eight hours for pain. The most recent prescription had been written on February twenty-seventh.

"What was the size of those capsules?" asked Kilgore.

"They contained eight hundred milligrams of his medication."

"And he took three capsules a day, then," said the prosecutor.

"That's right. Three a day."

"So a prescription would last about a month."

"Thirty-three days. Yes."

"And if he began taking them, three a day, on February twenty-seventh, there would be twenty-eight left on March twenty-third."

The doctor nodded. "I guess so, yes."

Lenore Watson testified that she had found MacArthur O'Neil's body at seven-thirty on the morning of March twenty-third when she brought him his orange juice as she did every day at that time. He was lying on top of his bed in his pajamas. The mug of pills and

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a half-empty water glass were on his bedside table, and a pad of paper and a ballpoint pen lay on the bed.

"What did you do?" asked the A.D.A.

"I suppose I screamed," said Lennie. "His face was contorted, and I could see that he was dead. And he had died in horrible pain, I could see that, too. Then I touched him. He was cold. Then I cried. Then I called the police."

Lennie also testified that the accused, Eileen Rose O'Neil, had left the house on the afternoon of March third and had never returned.

"Twenty days before Mr. O'Neil died," said the prosecutor.

"Yes, that sounds right," said Lennie.

"How would you describe their relationship, from what you saw?"

"Well, Miss Eileen was gone a lot. The Mister always seemed happy when she came home. They did love each other, I think. But they argued a lot, too, the way married folks do, you know."

"Your Honor, please," said the defense attorney. "I object."

"I'm going to allow it," said the judge.

"What did they argue about?" said Kilgore to Lennie.

"Mostly that he didn't want to go anywhere or have people to the house," she said, "and that he didn't want her to go anywhere." Lennie smiled. "Miss Eileen, she liked being with people. Oh, she put up with a lot, especially after the Mister had his treatments. He was not an easy man. Didn't surprise me a bit when she up and left."

"Ms. Watson," said the prosecutor, "where did Mr. O'Neil keep his pain medication?"

"He dumped the pills into this big mug when he got them."

"And did anyone handle the pills besides him?"

"When Miss Eileen was there, she often brought him his pills. After she left, I sometimes brought them. Or he got them himself."

"Let me get this straight," said the prosecutor. "Mr. O'Neil got a new prescription of one hundred pills on February twenty-seventh. He dumped them into a mug. The accused and you and he were the only ones who handled that mug of pills. He took three a day. And on March third, four days later, the accused left and never returned."

"Yes," said Lennie. "That's right."

A middle-aged woman from Los Angeles testified that Eileen O'Neil had moved in with her next-door neighbor, Leonard Garrison, a wealthy jeweler to the stars, sometime during the first week of March. The couple were seen frequently in local restaurants and theaters and had, in fact, given a party March twenty-first which

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was attended by several moderately prominent television people. She further testified that she had seen the two together on several previous occasions when Eileen O'Neil had flown in for extended weekend visits with Garrison.

When the prosecution called me to the stand, I testified that MacArthur O'Neil's estate provided for a museum to be established at his home in Chatham, Massachusetts. His housekeeper, Lenore Watson, had been provided for with employment at the museum until such time as she should decide to retire, plus an annuity commensurate with her housekeeper's salary. A one-million-dollar trust provided for Eileen Rose O'Neil.

"A million dollars, Mr. Coyne," said the prosecutor.

"Yes."

"And how was she to receive it?"

"Upon Mac's death she was to get all of it."

"Had he discussed changing his will with you?"

"Yes. But he said he wanted to wait. He figured she'd come back to him."

"For the money? Is that what he meant?"

"He didn't say," I said.

"And you were with Mr. O'Neil shortly before his death, Mr. Coyne," said the A.D.A.

"Yes. I spent an afternoon with him about a week before he died."

"What did you do?"

"Mac beat me two games of chess. We talked, had a drink and supper, and I left."

"Did you talk about his will or estate?"

"Only briefly. He indicated he did not want to make any changes at that time, as I just said."

"How did he seem to you, Mr. Coyne?"

"Objection," said the defense attorney. "For heaven's sake, Your Honor."

"Let me rephrase the question," said the A.D.A. "Did Mr. O'Neil say anything to you to suggest that he might be considering suicide?"

I said, "No," at the same time that the word, "Objection!" echoed through the courtroom.

"I withdraw the question," said Karen Kilgore, smiling. "No further questions, Mr. Coyne. And the prosecution rests."

* * *

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The defense moved for dismissal on the grounds of insufficient evidence. The motion was denied.

The only defense witness was Eileen Rose O'Neil, who admitted that she had left her husband and, in spite of his threat to write her out of his will, had no intention of returning to him. He had become, she said, irascible and insulting to her, especially since his most recent diagnosis. She said that she believed his medication had affected his personality, and while she felt guilty about leaving him, she simply couldn't take it anymore.

Yes, she had moved back to Hollywood and had been living with Leonard Garrison, a jewelry maker she had met several years earlier on a television set. She was trying to restart her career. Her agent had been trying to get her roles.

No, she had not murdered her husband. She bowed her head. "I still loved him, the old crab," she said softly. "I just couldn't live with him anymore."

In her closing argument, A.D.A. Kilgore explained how Eileen Rose O'Neil had murdered her husband, MacArthur O'Neil.

"Potassium cyanide," she summarized, "is a chemical commonly used in jewelry making. Mrs. O'Neil procured some of that poison from her jeweler friend, Leonard Garrison, on one of her visits to Hollywood. Intending to leave her husband, she emptied one of his pain capsules and filled it with cyanide. She then returned it to the mug and stirred it in among the other pills so that, at some future time—after she was settled a continent away from him, but before he could divorce her or alter his will—that is, in the less than thirty-three days before his mug would be emptied of his prescription—he would ingest that fatal capsule and die. He was an elderly man suffering from a painful terminal disease. His death, she figured, would be considered suicide. Eileen Rose O'Neil had motive—her fear that her husband would cut her off from his considerable estate. She had means—access to potassium through her friendly jeweler. And she had opportunity—the mug of pills was there for her to tamper with."

The A.D.A. concluded by reminding the jury that their job was to determine guilt beyond *reasonable* doubt, not *absolute* doubt.

The defense attorney beseeched the jury to acknowledge that all the evidence that had been presented was circumstantial and susceptible to any number of reasonable alternative explanations. "Pick a culprit," he said. "The housekeeper. The lawyer. Anybody. Then

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create your own scenario. This is a trumped-up case. Eileen O'Neil is innocent."

Two days later the jury brought back its verdict. Eileen Rose O'Neil was found guilty. A week later the judge sentenced her to twelve to sixteen years in prison. Of course, the million dollars that Mac had bequeathed to her was forfeited. It was, in accordance with the conditions of his will, shifted to the estate that set up and maintained the MacArthur O'Neil Mystery Museum in the rambling Cape Cod mansion on the hilltop in Chatham, overlooking the sea.

On the second anniversary of Mac's death, I followed his instructions and slid his videocassette into my VCR. I lit a cigarette and sat to watch. On the television screen, Mac was gesturing at the chessboard. "I intend no metaphor, Brady," he said. "Chess is not life. In chess there are rules. Each piece has its limits, and they are fixed and immutable. The board's sixty-four squares define the boundaries of the game. But in life, Brady, the only law is survival. Otherwise, there are no rules or boundaries, in spite of man's best efforts to impose them. Man has the option of ignoring boundaries and breaking rules if he is willing to risk the consequences. Sometimes, in order to obey the law of survival, he *must* break man-made rules and overstep boundaries. This is called freedom. It is our blessing and our curse. So," he said, picking up a pawn, "do not confuse the chess lesson with the life lesson, my friend."

On the chessboard Mac played out variations of what he called the Knight's Gambit opening, demonstrating his responses to each anticipated defense. In every case, the attack managed to isolate the queen even as it brought pressure on the king. "And so," he said to the camera, "the defender guards his king and leaves his queen, the game's most powerful piece, vulnerable. She inevitably falls, and concession is the only alternative to the unavoidable checkmate. This is the Knight's Gambit, Brady. An assault on the queen by misdirection. But, as I say, do not infer a metaphor here. This is chess. It's a game. It's not life. When a game ends, the winner and loser shake hands. Whereas in life, the winner survives and the loser dies." He paused and leaned toward the camera. "Or," he said conspiratorially, "vice versa."

Mac picked up the black queen and held it between his thumb and forefinger. "In chess, Brady," he said into the camera, "the queen's job is to protect her king and attack his enemies. She cannot

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betray him. The rules of the game forbid it. But in life, where there are no rules, the queen can be—and often is—perfidious. In life, the king cannot depend on his queen. He must be prepared to protect himself. There are even times when he must punish a traitorous queen."

Mac closed his hand over the white queen. He held his other fist to the camera. "In chess, Brady, the queen can move large distances and capture all of the weaker pieces. The king is restricted to the contiguous squares. He is weak. In life, it is often the same. But in life, the king can summon other resources." He opened his fist. In his palm lay a green-and-white capsule. "In life, as in chess," he said, "the success of a plan often depends on luring your opponent into mistakes by making calculated sacrifices. You give up something you can spare for the sake of ultimate victory. In chess, you sacrifice material. In life, Brady, you must sometimes sacrifice life itself."

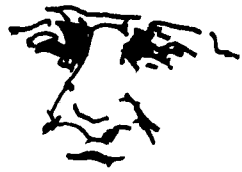
He closed his fist on the capsule and grinned into the camera. "I hope you have enjoyed my final mystery, my friend. The ending will be written after I die. By now you know how it came out. I only regret that I cannot be there to see for myself. But, of course, that is not possible. That's what makes it good, eh?"

I played Mac's tape for Karen Kilgore. When it was over, she smiled and shook her head. "He never comes out and says it," she said.

"But it's obvious," I said. "He framed her. And everybody bought it. And now she's in prison."

The A.D.A. shrugged. "I'll have to show it to a grand jury," she said. "And of course I'll tell them what I think it means. I'll argue for a retrial. But nowhere does he really explain it or confess it. They'll need more than a damn riddle to reopen the case."

"Which Mac fully understood," I said. "He was a devious player—in chess and in life. And he rarely lost."



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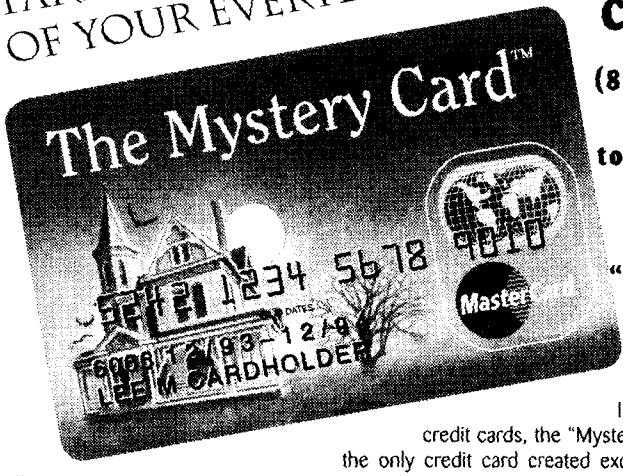

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THE GYPSY'S PAW

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was peaceful that summer in the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps, or as peaceful as life ever got for Gypsies in Romania these days. Michael Vlado, king of his small tribe in the village of Gravita, had settled into his work of raising and training horses, and the others went about their summer chores, pleased for the moment that the anti-Gypsy sentiment sweeping through Eastern Europe had passed them by.

Michael's wife Rosanna, who earned money by carving wooden animals to be sold at village shops, was the first to tell him of the strange Gypsy woman named Esmeralda who lived in a neighboring village. "I brought some of my wooden animals to a shop in Agula today," she told him as she cooked a modest dinner of beans, rice, and pork. "The shopkeeper thinks they will sell well to travelers."

"That is good news, Rosanna. Soon you will be adding helpers for the carving."

She knew he teased her about the hobby, though lately the money from it had helped him buy another stallion for breeding. "They say in Agula there is a Rom with magic powers," Rosanna told him. "Her name is Esmeralda."

Michael snorted. "An old woman with a bear's paw! I have heard the stories."

"People pay her to make their wishes come true."

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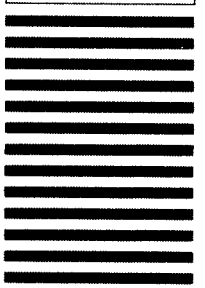

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"It is women like that who make the Gypsy someone to fear and hate, no better than the cutpurses who ply the streets of Athens and Rome. I should speak with her."

"She is not of our tribe," Rosanna reminded him.

"All Roms are one tribe," he replied, voicing words that were more a desire than a fact.

"Go, then! Go and see the woman Esmeralda!"

His face relaxed into a smile. "What wish should I make for you?"

"That I sell more of my little animals."

Two days later, on the weekend, Michael Vlado drove down the steep road to the neighboring village of Agula. It was a more prosperous area than Gravita, and large, well-built farmhouses dotted the hillsides in sharp contrast to the Gypsy cabins at higher elevations. But some Gypsies lived among the people and were tolerated more than in the cities. An old woman like Esmeralda would take up magic late in life, perhaps when her other charms were no longer profitable.

Everyone knew where she lived, and Michael found the cabin without difficulty. Esmeralda, who seemed to have no last name, was a wrinkled woman in her seventies. Though stooped like a crone, she could move about with surprising agility when necessary. Michael was amazed when she admitted him and promptly laid out cups and saucers for tea.

"That's hardly necessary," he protested. "I only stopped by for a visit."

She nodded and kept setting the table. "I know you, Michael Vlado. You are king of your tribe in the village of Gravita. Do you come to see old Esmeralda for the wishes my magic paw can bestow?"

"I do not believe in magic paws," he told her. "But I do believe in Gypsy women who shame us with their small swindles. I have come to ask you to stop this business."

She brought a teapot from the stove and filled their cups before she answered. "You are a strong man, still in middle age. I am an old woman who has no other way to make a living. Would you have me beg in the streets as the children do? These days that would get me arrested and perhaps shot."

"But this business with the paw is distasteful!"

"Let me show you," she said, as if the sight of the thing would win him over to her side. She disappeared into a back bedroom and returned in a moment carrying an intricately carved ebony box.

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"Is that a dragon?" he asked, running his fingers over the carving.

"It is. This box came from China, a gift from a man who loved me many years ago."

She opened the box's hinged lid and revealed a furry extremity about the size of Michael's fist, with claws clearly visible at one end. "It is the right front paw of a brown bear. The strength of the brown bear is well known among the Rom. They have been said to kill an adult cow with a single swipe of their forepaw." She lifted it and playfully swung it in Michael's direction.

"You must have been a tigress in your youth," he told her.

"Only a bear. Now this paw brings me money. People pay to have their wishes come true."

"But do they come true? Ever?"

"Sometimes. Any wish can come true sometimes." She returned the paw to its ebony box and closed it. "Come with me and I will show you. This very night I am calling on a wealthy couple with a missing son. They came to me two weeks ago but I would not help them at once. I wanted to be sure the magic of the paw would work. Tonight I will show them, and you."

"What time?"

"I go there at dusk. If you drive me I will not have to hire the local taxi."

Michael shook his head and chuckled, "Ah, Esmeralda, you have charmed your way through life and you are still doing it in old age."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"Yes, yes! I will go with you. I will even carry your paw. But believe me, I am a skeptical audience."

It was six hours till dusk and Michael drove back up the hill to his village. When he told his wife what he had agreed to do that night, she thought him insane. "But what will you accomplish? Your presence will simply lend credence to that old woman."

"I hope to convince these people that all Gypsies are not tricksters and swindlers. It is time for Esmeralda to retire to gardening and knitting."

Rosanna snorted and went away.

After dinner he made the journey down to Agula once more. The old Gypsy woman was waiting by the door, watching for him. A light summer rain was starting to fall and he helped her to the car, sheltering her head with his coat. "I thought you would not come," she said, safely in the car with her ebony box.

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"My word is good," he assured her. "Which way shall I go?"

"To the left. I will guide you."

Presently, in the failing light, they came upon a two-story farmhouse set back a bit from the road. It was white with green shutters, and seemed out of place among the rough wooden cabins and larger chalets of the countryside. The rain was falling harder now and in the gathering gloom a spotlight had been turned on above the front door. There was no sidewalk such as city homes had, only a dirt path growing wetter by the minute.

A man opened the door as they pulled up and called out, "It's getting muddy here. Drive around to the back."

Michael did as instructed and they pulled up into a covered carport. He helped Esmeralda into the house, carrying the ebony box as he'd promised. She was puffing with exertion as she entered, but she introduced him immediately. "Michael, this is Olak and Frieda Glasnach." She squinted into the room beyond them where a young man had just gotten to his feet. "And their son Andre."

Michael shook hands all around and accompanied them into the cozy living room of the farmhouse. Olak Glasnach was a rough-hewn man of middle age, a farmer whose working life had been spent beneath the brutal sun. Every victory, every defeat, seemed etched into his skin. By contrast, his wife Frieda had flat and pale features unmarked by strong emotion. The son, Andre, hung back from them like a common workman, his bulging biceps clearly visible beneath his sleeveless workshirt. It seemed obvious that he labored on the farm with his father.

"This is Michael Vlado," Esmeralda quickly explained. "He is king of the Gypsy tribe in Gravita."

"A pleasure to have you here," Olak Glasnach said. Then, a bit puzzled, he asked the Gypsy woman, "Does he take part in the ceremony?"

"Only as an observer." She reached out her wrinkled hands for the ebony box and Michael passed it to her. He was thinking it would be better for all concerned if she stuck to tarot cards. Bear paws were a bit too exotic.

"Could you tell me a little of the background?" Michael asked. "I understand there is a second son—"

It was Frieda who spoke as they seated themselves around a low table in the living room. On it she'd placed a plate of rich Romanian delicacies of the sort Michael had rarely tasted. As a boy they'd been treasures he saw through bakery windows, always just out of reach.

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"My older son Felipe lived here and worked the farm with his father and brother. We were a happy family until a year ago."

"What happened then?"

"He met a woman." She almost spat the words, though her expression changed very little.

"A woman named Louise," Andre supplied. "She tempted him away from his family."

"Where is he now?"

"In Bucharest, living with her."

"The bear's paw will bring him back," Esmeralda assured them, "if you wish for it strongly enough."

"I don't believe any of this," Andre said and started to leave the room.

"Come back here!" his mother ordered. "We must all wish for it."

The sky had grown dark outside with the coming of night and they could hear the rain, harder now, beating on the windows with each shift of the breeze. Old Esmeralda smiled and opened the ebony box. Watching it all, as if in slow motion, Michael wondered why he had come here. If it was to expose the fakery, now was the time to speak. But he said nothing.

"Place your hands upon the paw," the Gypsy woman said, and removed it from the box. The father, Olak, seemed reluctant to be first, but his wife did not hesitate. She touched the dead fur, caressed it, and waited for her husband and son to do likewise. After a moment Olak did so, and then Andre. "Now repeat after me—*I wish our son and brother Felipe to return home this night.*"

"I wish our son and brother Felipe to return home this night," they responded, more or less in unison.

Nothing happened.

They waited and still nothing happened. There was no sound except the beating of the rain.

For nearly ten minutes no one spoke. Then it was Esmeralda who broke the silence. "Sometimes it takes awhile, but he will arrive. Let us just sit back and wait."

"It's a long way from Bucharest," Glasnach said. "A drive of three hours or more on a night like this."

"The paw knows no distance," Esmeralda told him.

They waited an hour, talking of village matters and the summer weather, which had been unusually dry till that evening. They talked of everything but the missing Felipe, and to Michael the desultory conversation was worse than silence. "Do you have any

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way of reaching your son in Bucharest?" he asked at last.

Frieda Glasnach was on her feet pacing, full of nervous energy. "He gave us a phone number once, after he'd left the farm for that woman. We never used it. I showed it to you, Esmeralda."

"Get it now," Esmeralda said. "Something has gone wrong with the magic."

Michael sighed. "Why prolong this, woman? He is never coming. Put your paw back in its box."

But Frieda was already pulling open the drawer of a cabinet. On a piece of paper was a telephone number scrawled beneath the single word "Felipe." "Here it is. I tried to call him only once, but that woman answered and I hung up."

Though she'd asked for the number, old Esmeralda refused to accept the paper. "I cannot call. One of you must do it."

They stared blankly at each other and finally Olak said, "We are paying you to bring our son home by Gypsy magic. The telephone call we could make at any time."

The old woman turned to Michael. "Will you call? Simply call and ask for him."

Sorry now that he had ever come, feeling himself trapped in this woman's scheme gone wrong, Michael reluctantly agreed. How had she ever expected to get money out of this family with her withered bear's paw?

The telephone lines between the villages and the country's capital city were not always reliable and it took him some minutes before the connection was made. He heard the ringing of the phone and then the voice of a young woman. "Hello?"

"I wish to speak with Felipe Glasnach."

There was a muffled gasp at the other end. "Hello?" Michael said. "Is Felipe there?"

"Felipe is dead. He drowned in the Dimbovita River two days ago."

The news sent a chill through the Glasnach family when Michael told them. Oddly, it was the father rather than the mother who burst into tears, and it was he whom Andre went to comfort. "Dead," he repeated in a flat tone. "Dead, dead, dead."

Only Esmeralda seemed unshaken by the news. "The paw will bring him back," she told them.

"What is it?" Andre scoffed. "A monkey's paw like that story I once read, with the power to bring him back from the grave?"

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"He is in no grave, only a river."

Michael had gotten no details of the tragedy before the woman on the other end hung up. "I will go to see her if you wish," he told the family, trying to make amends for all that Esmeralda had done. "You must know her name."

"Louise Stricker," Frieda said. "She is German, we think."

Andre left them, more from disgust than sorrow, and they heard him go up to his room. But still the old Gypsy woman clutched the bear paw to her breast and whispered of things to come. "I will take you home soon," Michael told her. "We must leave these people alone with their grief."

"A little longer," she begged. If she was waiting for something he could not imagine what it was.

And then they heard it—a loud knocking on the front door that seemed to resound through the house.

For a moment they were all frozen in their chairs, unable to move. Even Esmeralda seemed unbelieving, but she was the first to get up. "That's him," she spoke with assurance. "He's come back."

They heard the knocking again, much gentler this time, as Andre came running down the stairs. He must have seen that his mother was on the verge of hastening to the door, because he begged her, "Do not open it! Felipe has been summoned by this crone from his watery grave!"

It was Olak who headed for the door as the gentle tapping came again. "If it is my son he will always be welcome here."

"My God, father!" Andre sprang forward and grabbed the bear paw from Esmeralda's hand. Before anyone could say a word he shouted, "I wish my brother Felipe back in his watery grave!"

"*No!*" Frieda screamed. She ran for the door, reaching it just before her husband, slid back the bolt, and yanked it open.

The light from above shone down on an empty front yard. There was no one in sight. Frieda Glasnach breathed a long sigh of despair.

"Look there!" her husband said, pointing to the ground.

Michael and Andre joined them, peering at the dirt path to the front door. All was mud now, and sunken into the mud was a line of recent footprints leading to the door. They came as far as the door and stopped, not going back or to either side.

Whoever made them had either entered the house through the bolted door or vanished without a trace.

* * *

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The summer rainstorm seemed only to grow worse through the night. Michael accompanied Andre up to Felipe's old bedroom at the rear of the house. The room seemed dusty and closed against the outside world but in the closet they found a pair of the elder son's work boots. Michael took them downstairs and risked the rain to fit both boots into the muddy footprints by the front door. They were an exact fit.

"So he was here," Olak Glasnach said.

"Or someone wanted us to think he was here," Michael Vlado replied. "I will drive down to the capital in the morning. For now I suggest you believe nothing that you have seen or heard. If I find evidence of your son's death, I will phone you at once."

The events of the evening, hard as they were on the family, seemed finally to have affected old Esmeralda as well. "I want to go home," she told Michael shortly before midnight. "I don't understand any of this."

He helped her out to the car and promised to return with news. Frieda had given him a picture of her son to aid in identification. He was a thin, smiling young man, handsomer than his younger brother. Michael could see why the attractions of city life might have lured him away from the family farm.

"Will you be all right?" Michael asked as he drove the Gypsy woman to her cabin.

"Yes. I am just tired. So much has happened tonight."

"You really thought he would come, didn't you?"

"I thought so," she agreed.

"But you can't believe in something as preposterous as the wishes granted by a bear's paw!"

She turned her old eyes toward him. "You have grown away from your roots, Michael Vlado. Always remember you are a Gypsy first!"

He helped her to the door of the cabin and went on his way. The rain was beginning to let up so he was able to negotiate the muddy roads back up to his village. He said very little to Rosanna about what had transpired. She was already in bed and only grunted as he slipped beneath the covers.

In the morning he told her he must go to Bucharest. "On a Sunday?" she asked as she prepared breakfast. "What for?"

"That Gypsy woman, Esmeralda, is in trouble. She's involved in something quite serious and needs help."

"She is not one of us."

"Not of our tribe, no, but she is a Rom."

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"Go, then," his wife said, looking away.

"I will tell you everything when I get back," he promised.

The rain of the night before had given way to morning sun, and as soon as he hit the main road at the base of the foothills he was able to make good time. There was virtually no traffic on a Sunday morning until he reached the outskirts of Bucharest itself. Then he phoned Louise Stricker and obtained her address. It was noon when he arrived at her apartment near the public gardens.

Louise Stricker was a slender woman with straight black hair that framed her face. She was plain yet attractive, something like Frieda Glasnach must have looked in her younger days. Perhaps that was what had first attracted Felipe. Now she wore no makeup, and her dark blue dress might have been a symbol of mourning.

"You were a friend of Felipe?" she asked as she held the door open for him. The apartment was plain, with only a few colorful touches like a witty stuffed bat and a rainbow poster from a rock concert.

"Not really," he admitted, having given her that impression on the phone. "I know his parents."

"I'm sorry. I should have phoned them. It's just that we've never spoken. I know how they feel about me."

"Tell me how he died."

"He had to work for a while Thursday morning. He had a job at the university bookstore. I expected him to be home in the afternoon but he didn't come. Finally I called the bookstore and they said he hadn't been in, not at all!" Her voice broke and she was close to tears. "I went out to retrace the route he must have taken that morning. When I was crossing the bridge over the Dimbovita I saw some policemen and a small crowd down by the water. I realized they were dragging for a body."

"Felipe?"

She nodded. "I recognized a shirt I'd given him. He'd been wearing it that morning. It had been found by the water, and his other clothes as well."

"You believe he killed himself?"

"I don't know what I believe. We'd been arguing lately. He was thirty-one years old but still tied to his family. He walked out on them a year ago but there wasn't a weekend when he didn't want to call them. Sometimes we'd have terrible fights about it."

"Did they find his body?"

"Not yet. They're still searching."

"Is it possible that he didn't die, that he returned to the farm?"

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"I can't imagine that. He still loved them at a distance but after a year away he never could have gone back to living that life. He told me how they watched over every aspect of the boys' lives. They had no girls and very few male friends. All their time was spent on the farm, working year-round."

"Farming takes a great deal of time."

"But to rob them of their lives like that! The parents were almost paranoid about dangers of any sort. His father slept with a shotgun under the bed. They had a bucket of sand and an escape rope in the bedroom in case of fire. On rare occasions when the boys went to a dance in their village, the father or mother went along to make sure they didn't drink too much."

"How did he meet you?"

"Somehow they agreed to let him take classes at the university here—a course in farm management, because the farm would someday be his. I was in my final year, completing my teaching preparations. When I graduated at the beginning of last summer he decided to remain here with me. The family was furious. His younger brother met with him and tried to get him back, but that only convinced him he'd done the right thing."

"And you had a good life together?"

"The best," she said as her eyes teared over once more. "I can't understand what happened."

"You said you'd argued lately."

She shrugged. "That was about his family. It was the only thing we ever disagreed about."

"Was there anything unusual in the days before he di—disappeared?"

"Nothing, except for the old woman."

"What old woman?"

"I saw him talking to a woman across the street there. It must have been Monday or Tuesday. He told me it was just a Gypsy woman begging for money, but they seemed to talk for a long time."

"Do Gypsies still beg for money on the city streets?"

"Rarely. They fear arrest from the new government. That was why it seemed so strange."

It seemed strange to Michael too. "How old a woman was this?"

"Old. In her seventies at least, maybe older than that. She seemed to get around without any trouble, though she was stooped."

He realized she was describing Esmeralda, and he wondered what she had been doing with Felipe Glasnach. "Thank you, Miss Stricker. You've been a big help."

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"Where are you going now?"

"I have a friend with the police. Perhaps I can learn something from him."

When Michael first met him he had been Captain Segar of the government militia, a sort of police force under the old socialist government. Though he had received a promotion in the new republic, many of his duties were similar to what they had been. He still supervised certain elements of law enforcement, though he no longer wore the uniform of the militia.

On this Sunday afternoon Michael found him at home, entertaining a young woman who immediately vanished into the next room. "I didn't mean to frighten off your visitor," Michael told his old friend with a grin.

Segar shifted uneasily. He was in his early forties, about Michael's age, and though they'd been friends for nine years Michael knew virtually nothing about his private life. "Forget about it, Michael. It is so rare to see you in Bucharest these days. What brings you here?"

"An old Gypsy woman named Esmeralda, who can summon the dead with the paw of a bear."

"You are beyond believing in such things, my friend. Let me pour you a bit of wine and you can tell me about it from the beginning."

And so Michael told him all of it, and when he had finished Segar nodded and said, "It is some sort of fraud, a clever deception."

"Of course it is! But to what purpose? Who are the deceivers and who is the deceived?"

Segar merely shook his head. "Let me make a call and see if a body has been recovered from the river."

Michael listened while he spoke to the officer in charge of the river detail. "Anything?" he asked when Segar hung up.

"Nothing yet, but I have expressed my interest. They will search with renewed vigor."

Michael took the photograph from his pocket. "This is Felipe Glasnach. You may need it for identification." He paused and added, "That is, if you find anything at all."

"I'll keep you advised," Segar told him.

"Express my apologies to your lady friend."

Segar walked him to the door. "Someday, Michael, we must have a long talk about life and love."

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"I look forward to it. Gypsies are said to be experts in at least one of those subjects."

He drove out of Bucharest along the river, following it for some distance before turning north toward home.

On Monday morning Michael visited old Esmeralda once more. The Gypsy woman seemed less pleased to see him than on his first visit two days earlier. "What—you've come to cause more trouble, Michael Vlado?"

"I wasn't aware that I caused trouble," he said as she moved away from the door to let him enter. "I do know that you traveled to Bucharest last week to see Felipe Glasnach."

"And if I did? Is it so wrong to bring peace and happiness to a family in exchange for a little money?"

"Where is Felipe now?" he asked. "Is he dead or alive?"

"Only the paw knows."

"Then get out the paw and ask it! I want an answer, Esmeralda!"

She sat down heavily, as if the weight of her years was at last beginning to leave its mark. "I do not know the answer." Her voice was sad and tired.

"Why did you go to Bucharest? And how did you find him?"

"The family had his phone number. I called and arranged a meeting. He didn't want his woman to know. I begged him to return home, for the sake of the family. He said he would like to, but was reluctant to leave this woman."

"Louise Stricker."

"Yes, that was her name. I asked him to come Saturday night, just after dark. I arranged to conduct a session with the family using the bear's paw as a charm. Felipe would arrive home at the proper moment and be reunited with his family. They would be overjoyed and I would receive the money I'd been promised."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," she answered sadly. "Something went wrong."

"The Stricker woman thinks Felipe drowned himself in the Dimbovita River."

"Perhaps he did. He was a deeply troubled young man."

"Then who came to the door Saturday night? Who made those footprints in the mud? And what happened to him?"

"I do not know," she admitted. "This world is filled with stranger things. Somehow even a false charm can work real wonders."

"Like bringing someone back from the dead?"

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"Perhaps he is not dead."

"Perhaps."

There was nothing more to say, and Michael departed soon after that. He went back home and exercised the horses for a time, all the while trying to puzzle out what had happened. He was still there when Rosanna summoned him to the telephone. "It's Segar," she said, "calling from Bucharest."

He hurried to the phone and heard the familiar voice on the other end. "Michael, I thought you'd want to know we have recovered the body."

"What?" Virtually no news could have surprised him more.

"That's right. It was found early this morning a few hundred meters downstream from where he left his clothes."

"Does it look like suicide?"

"No, there was a wire around his neck with handles attached at the ends. He'd been garroted, apparently in the course of a robbery."

"You're sure of the identification?"

"The picture you gave me was a great help. There's no doubt it's him."

"Thank you for calling, Segar."

"One more thing—"

"What's that?"

"The body was fully clothed."

For an instant Michael didn't grasp the significance of his words. "What about it?"

"He'd left his clothes upstream near the bridge, but he was still fully clothed. There's something strange about the whole thing."

Once more Michael Vlado drove down the hill to Agula, passing Esmeralda's cabin and driving directly to the Glasnachs' farmhouse. The front path was dry today, with no trace of footprints, and he knocked on the door. The son Andre opened it. "Come in," he said. "We've had a call from Bucharest. They've found my brother's body."

Michael nodded. "That's why I came."

Frieda Glasnach was sobbing quietly in the front room while her husband tried to comfort her. Michael said what he could, but they seemed to take no notice of his words. Finally Andre brought him a glass of wine and forced some on his parents as well.

"You'll have to forgive us," Olak said when he'd recovered some of his composure. "We knew the news would be bad but it was still a shock."

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"I have more news for you, and you won't find it pleasant. As a Rom, the king of my tribe, I feel I owe you an apology for the actions of old Esmeralda. The woman is a fraud, her bear's paw is worthless. She journeyed to Bucharest last week and met with your son. She persuaded him to leave Louise Stricker and return here. Apparently the relationship had cooled a bit, but not enough that he could openly walk away from it. I believe he arranged to fake his own suicide rather than face a scene with the Stricker woman. Esmeralda hoped to get money from you by having him appear after you all wished on the bear's paw."

"But he wasn't killed here," Frieda pointed out. "He was killed in Bucharest."

"I know. The key to it all seems to be Esmeralda's conversation with him last week. I think if she can remember it all she can tell us who killed him."

"What about the footprints at our door?" Olak asked. "How do you explain those?"

"Esmeralda may have arranged to fake them somehow, though she hasn't admitted it yet."

"How do you fake footprints in mud? They were made by a person wearing shoes of Felipe's size. There is no tree limb or anything else close enough for him to have climbed onto. And if they were made much earlier we'd have seen them, or the heavy rain would have washed them away."

"I plan to question Esmeralda again in the morning," Michael told the father. "She knows more than she's telling."

He left them, promising to return, and headed back home while Olak and Andre returned to their work in the field. Even the tragedy of a lost son could not interrupt the chores of a farm day for long. He thought of Frieda alone in the house with her thoughts, but decided she might be able to handle it better than the men. With luck, tomorrow would see an end to it—an end to the questions if not the grief.

That night, just after dark, he went once more to the cabin of old Esmeralda. This time he did not enter by the front door but parked some distance away and slipped around through the woods to the rear.

By the time she heard him he was already inside. Her frightened eyes peered at him from the bedclothes. "What have you come for, Michael Vlado? Are you an avenger?"

"Not an avenger but a savior. Hush now, and wait."

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He might have been wrong. He had been wrong many times before in judging the workings of an irrational mind. But he waited beneath Esmeralda's bed, forced to caution her every few minutes when she tried to whisper a question. An hour passed, and then another.

It was a bit after midnight when he heard one of the cabin windows being slid open. Quietly, someone climbed in and moved around, perhaps searching for the bedroom. Then he saw the figure above her bed, saw a glint of moonlight on the dagger. It would be a knife this time, because that was a Gypsy weapon.

Michael grabbed the ankles and the figure went down with a crash. Esmeralda screamed from her bed. Then he was on the figure, grasping for the knife hand. The glare of a spotlight targeted the struggle and suddenly Captain Segar was coming through the door with one of his men.

"Take him, Segar," Michael gasped, panting from the struggle. "There's your murderer—Andre Glasnach. He killed his own brother."

It was Segar who asked, "How did you know he'd come here, Michael? I must admit when you phoned me earlier to ask for help I thought it was a waste of time."

"When I visited the Glasnach house earlier I played up Esmeralda's meeting with their dead son and the probability that she had some special knowledge. Andre couldn't take a chance that it was true. Felipe might have told her of his plans, even told her he feared returning because of Andre. As the eldest son, the farm was Felipe's if he came back. But it would be Andre's if he stayed away. For a man who killed his brother, killing an old Gypsy woman would have been easy."

"The faked suicide—?"

"As I explained to the family earlier, Felipe was ready to return home but couldn't face the scene of breaking up with Louise Stricker. He left his clothes by the river and went into hiding until Saturday night, when he'd told Esmeralda he would reappear at the family farmhouse."

The Gypsy woman stirred in her bed, following his explanation when she could keep her eyes open. "I had it all planned," she muttered. "We wished on the paw and he was supposed to knock at the door."

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"But the rain and the bad roads delayed him. You kept waiting and he didn't come. Andre finally went up to his bedroom and there from his window, bathed in the light from above the front door, he saw his brother approaching through the rain. Perhaps he was prepared for such a possibility, or perhaps he ran into his parents' room for the rope they kept in case of fires. A quick slipknot, as Felipe hesitated by the front door, and then he dropped the noose through the open window right around his brother's neck."

"My God!" Segar whispered.

"The muddy footprints stopped because Felipe, small of bone, was yanked straight up in the air by his muscular brother, and left hanging from the second-floor window of the farmhouse. Then Andre ran downstairs and quickly wished his brother away with the bear's paw."

"No, no," the old woman protested from her bed. "We could still hear the knocking after Andre came down from his room!"

"We heard it more faintly. It was the sound of Felipe's boots hitting the side of the house as he struggled in his dying agony."

"Why didn't we see the body when we opened the door?"

"It was above us. More importantly, it was above the spotlight over the door. If anyone looked up, the strong light blinded them and they never saw the body. I went upstairs to get boots to compare with the muddy tracks but Andre kept me away from his room where the rope went out the window. Later, perhaps as we were leaving, he pulled the body into his room. During the night he would have lowered it out again and carried it to the car his brother had parked nearby. On Sunday he drove the body to Bucharest and dumped it in the river, hoping it was close to the right spot. He wrapped a wire garrote around the throat to conceal the marks of the rope and hide the real cause of death."

"How did you know this?" Segar asked. "Can it be proven?"

"The autopsy on Felipe's body will show that he died Saturday rather than Thursday. And a careful examination might even find evidence of the rope marks. Once you have that, Andre is the only possibility. Only he was upstairs when the knocking started. And only he, as the killer, knew that his final wish on the bear's paw would be successful. He had the motive—to inherit the farm someday for himself—and the opportunity. I think you can prove that he was away long enough on Sunday to drive to Bucharest and back."

"When did you suspect him?" Segar asked.

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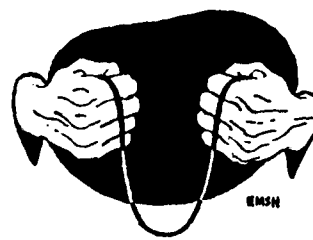
"When I went over Saturday's events in my mind. Andre was the first to scoff at the bear's paw and its wishes, yet he ran downstairs to use it himself when the knocking came."

As it turned out, Segar needn't have worried about evidence. Shortly before his mother and father were to visit him at the Agula jail, Andre managed to cut his wrists with a razor blade he'd hidden in his mouth. He'd put it back under his tongue as he bled to death in his cell.

Later, when Michael Vlado finished telling Rosanna everything that had happened, she, with her literary mind, turned to him and said, as Andre had earlier, "It was 'The Monkey's Paw'!"

Michael, his voice soft and sad, corrected her. "No, it was 'The Prodigal Son.' "



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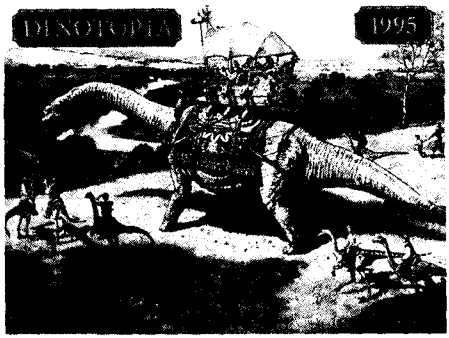

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We go far afield this month, with an offering from Australian Neil Jillett. Four of Mr. Jillett's stories have appeared in our sister publication Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine; *his debut for us is splendidly ironic, and a pleasure to the senses as well as the mind . . .*

SILK AND LAVENDER

by NEIL JILLETT

Ronald rearranges the six words he has written since breakfast. . . . Vera hums waltzes from *The Merry Widow* as she makes cheese and tomato sandwiches. . . . Shirley drums her fingers as she hears how much tax she is expected to pay. . . . Dave pushes the mower and congratulates himself on his success in mixing business with pleasure. . .

Silk helps to put Ronald in a creative mood. Color is as important as the tingling slide of the fabric over his skin. His shirt is very pale blue, conducive to the cool precision he hopes to bring to the poem.

He has been a poet all week. Tomorrow he must go back, at least for a few hours, to accountancy.

Vera stands in the doorway of the room that is Ronald's study when he is a poet and his office when he is an accountant.

"I'm off to meet my young lover," she says.

She says this at least once a week and at various times of the day. Ronald registers it as a joke not suitable in a woman of her age. He never knows where she is going, although he assumes it must be to the shops or a film or a game of bridge. It is years since he took any interest in her activities. It does not occur to him that she is speaking the truth when she mentions a lover.

"Enjoy yourself," he says.

"I will," she says. "Your sandwiches are in the fridge, and I've switched on the answerphone."

"Thanks." Ronald looks up and runs his hand over his shirt. "I'm still in my ice phase. There's some green ones I may try later in the

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day, but just in case . . ." Again he runs his hand over the blue silk.

"Two of the same," Vera says, "washed and ironed and hanging in your wardrobe."

"Good." The word comes out almost as a grunt. Ronald's head is down as he carves and chisels with his pen.

"There's also a purple one," Vera says, "for your appointment with the bishop tomorrow."

Ronald does not look up as Vera leaves.

It is as if he has a block of ice under his hands. He must impose an austere, hard-edged brilliance on the words. He has several poems of a similar style in mind. He will make them into a collection to be called *Icicles,* or perhaps *Ice Works,* to indicate the breadth of his variations on the theme of rational passion. The look of the poems is as important as the sound. Some will be no more than slivers. He imagines them on the page of a literary magazine, arranged in daggers of print. Other poems will be bolder, craggier, and he regrets that he cannot wear black as he writes them. But silk, no matter how deeply and somberly dyed, cannot reflect the infinite mystery of black, black ice.

There is also a problem with white silk. It always has a creamy tinge that contradicts the frozen purity that must characterize this series of poems. Ronald looks down at his shirt. He has seen photographs of Antarctic icebergs that have patches of just such a blue. There are, as he has indicated to Vera, possibilities in green too, in the prismatic shifts of light on ice.

Driving home, Shirley decides to find another accountant. She has emerged comfortably from her three marriages, but there is no point in frittering money away, and her present accountant is not giving her proper attention. His fancy office is evidence that he is too busy chasing the big corporate boys to spare enough time for smaller clients.

Shirley tells herself, "I need someone more susceptible than that bastard to having his vanity tickled."

She has learnt that most men hired for professional services respond to having their vanity tickled. *Get them in the right spot, and it's amazing how much they'll knock off a bill.*

Driving to meet her young lover, Vera tries not to think about Ronald's shirts and the tedium of ironing them into absolute creaselessness. Sometimes, to keep up with his possible changes of poetic

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mood, she washes and irons five shirts a day. He is undemanding sexually and in other ways. He doesn't notice how the house looks. It could be inches thick in dust for all he cares. He never fusses about his food. She can put anything on the table, so long as it is there regularly.

Vera knows that many women would consider the tending of a husband's shirts, and some secretarial work, a small price to pay for the freedom she has to get on with her own life. But she can't help asking herself whether she wants to continue paying it.

Ronald has been wearing silk for three years, since he resigned from his partnership in a city firm of accountants and established the home-based business that gives him more time for poetry. He has more than fifty silk shirts. They are an inspiration to his poetry, especially since he has developed, or imagines he has developed, allergies to other fibers. Vera, with an increasing impatience that he tries to ignore, does a good job of looking after the shirts. The colors run, even after repeated washing, so she does them by hand, although she has taken to muttering that he could do them himself, under the shower.

"You know I prefer baths," he replies.

"So wash them in the bath."

"You're so much better at it than I am. I can never get all the soap out. You know that irritates my skin."

"How about sending them out?"

"They'd starch them."

"I'd tell them not to."

"But they'd still iron creases into them."

Dave, who is barely half Vera's age, knows many bushy corners in the outer suburbs where lovers will not be disturbed. He and Vera are lying beside his four-wheel-drive and trailer, which is laden with two mowers, edge-trimmers, pruning hooks, and other equipment. The afternoon is sunny enough for them to have removed all their clothes.

Dave sniffs the soft place between Vera's neck and shoulder where her lavender perfume mingles with the smells of grass, sweat, and power mower fuel and oil from his own body.

"Yum," he says.

"Why me?" It is the first time since their affair began a year ago that she has asked the question that is often in her mind.

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"I like older women," he says with a laugh that both admits and denies the possibility that she is not the only love of his life.

Vera tries not to spoil things by feeling jealous. She also thinks that although Dave may not have heard of irony, he knows how to use it.

"Jeez," he says, looking at his watch, "if I don't get a move on I'll be late for Mrs. Henderson's lawns." When Vera gives him a look that she hopes is wryly affectionate, he adds, "She's over seventy. I don't like 'em that old!"

Hopping on one leg as he pulls on his jeans, he tells himself that although Vera and the others are good fun, Mrs. Henderson, whose grass does not need mowing until next week, is his best customer.

Mrs. Henderson is nudging into her mid-forties, not much younger than Vera, and at her peak, Dave reckons. She doesn't give a hoot what the neighbors think. She has a spa bath and a great range of crystals and lotions to go with it. She has even given him a key in case he wants to pop in for a soak when she is not home.

It will take twenty minutes to get to her place, so after a relaxing spell among the bubbles he should have got his second wind.

Vera senses the drift, if not the details, of his thoughts as he takes her back to where she parked her car. She gives a sigh. Dave interprets it as evidence that she is another satisfied customer.

Ronald is very sensitive to odors since he stopped smoking, to avoid burning holes in his silk shirts. He has not heard Vera return to the house, but he is aware of her presence a moment before she pokes her head into his study.

"You smell as if you've been mowing lawns," he says with his head down as he admires the two lines he wrote before lunch and the one and a half he has written since. He does not see her blush.

"I've been helping Helen with a spot of gardening."

"Thought you couldn't stand it," Ronald says. "Which is why we're paying that young mower chap a fortune."

"It's not so much like drudgery when it's someone else's garden," Vera says. She notes that Ronald has changed from pale blue silk to pale green. "I'll have a shower before I get dinner and wash your shirt from this morning while I'm about it."

Back at his poem, Ronald in no way acknowledges how much his comfort depends on her.

* * *

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Shirley, who does not give a hoot what the neighbors think, hugs and kisses Dave before he is in the front door.

"You smell of lavender," she says.

"Old Mrs. Plunkett," he says. "She's got acres of the stuff. I've been cutting it back."

"Pull the other one," says Shirley, who knows the difference between fresh lavender and the bottled stuff. But she is not annoyed. She does not expect to be the only woman in a man's life.

"Really," Dave says. "Her garden's like a lavender farm."

"Get those clothes off," says Shirley, shutting the door. "I've got the spa going. We'll both smell the same in no time."

Between soapy, scented kisses, she thinks it is a pity that he is not the type who looks good in a suit and tie and is likely to fancy a formal night out. Otherwise, she might ask him to go to the opera with her, although it is an entertainment she prefers to enjoy without the obligation to be good company.

The mood induced by the spa and Dave's proximity does not stop her thoughts turning from opera to more mundane matters.

"Do you know a good tax accountant?" she asks.

"Mine's okay, but he wouldn't suit you. All his business is with tradesmen."

"Oh."

"But a bloke I do lawns for might be just the ticket. He's a poet, too, from what I hear. Even had a book published." Vera has told Dave, more often and at greater length than he needs, about Ronald's shirts and writing. "Sensitive but hard-headed, he sounds. Could be just the bloke you're after."

"You're just the bloke I'm after," Shirley says.

"His name's Ronald Plunkett."

"Plunkett? I seem to have heard that name already today. I want an accountant in his prime, not some fuddy-duddy who smells of his wife's lavender bushes." She laughs to show she still doesn't believe Dave's story about old Mrs. Plunkett.

"It's a common enough name," Dave says. "This poet bloke's another branch of the clan."

Shirley, who enjoys coincidences and complications, grins kittenishly as she wonders whether Dave has inadvertently given her a chance to inspect one of his other satisfied customers.

Dave doesn't know what's got into him with this careless dropping of names, risking two customers getting together and comparing notes. Having watched the telly program *Mind Over Matter,* he sus-

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pects that his subconscious is playing tricks on him.

Ronald is back to being an accountant—briefly, he hopes. Through his neglect, business is falling off. He knows he should try to drum up some more, to keep money coming in and to avoid nibbling at his capital.

Apart from anything else, the bill for his tailor-made shirts is enormous. He discards each one after no more than twenty wearings and gives it to the Salvation Army clothing collection for the poor. At his insistence Vera experiments with many fabric softeners, but still the shirts lose their feathery delicacy.

He feels only slight guilt about the money spent on shirts. He would feel no guilt at all if he could sell just one poem. His tirelessly submitted lyrics, sonnets, odes, and blank and free verse are always rejected, even by small literary journals that do not pay for contributions. At his own expense he has published the traditional slim volume, hoping that the subsequent accolades will establish his name. His complaints to editors about their failure even to mention the book receive the offensive reply that it is not their policy to review "vanity publications."

Ronald's clothing bill is increased by his habit of matching silk shirts to the occupations of his accountancy clients as well as to his poetic moods. He reserves one shirt of a vile greenish yellow for the leader of a heavy metal rock group. "Man, that shirt, it's one crazy color," the rocker says. The phrasing, Ronald suspects, is a year or so behind the times. For his oldest client, a bishop with considerable private means, he wears purple. The bishop always remarks heartily that the shade is exactly the same as that of the silk bib below his own dog collar. But many clients are surprised that an accountant, even one working part-time at home, is not in a suit and tie. So they take their business elsewhere.

Brooding on such conservatism and on his poetry's lack of recognition, Ronald decides that after dinner he will put on a pink shirt, suggestive of a sunset glinting on snowy mountains. He will also have a bath. He always has a bath, or less often a shower, after discarding one shirt and before putting on another.

Hearing the water running, Vera wonders again whether all Ronald's changing of shirts, all his bathing, amounts to obsessive behavior of the kind that needs the attention of a psychiatrist.

The ring of the telephone interrupts this line of thought. The caller speaks at length about her dissatisfaction with her present

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accountant. Having arranged an appointment for the woman, Vera says to herself, "Mrs. Henderson? Where have I heard that name recently?" She remembers last week's meeting with Dave among the bushes. "Odd, but it's a common enough name."

The next day, after much ringing around, Shirley finds a shop on the other side of the city that has a book of poems by Ronald Plunkett.

"Be sure to keep a copy aside for me," she says. "I'd hate to come all that way and find you'd sold it."

"Don't worry," says the young man at the other end of the line. "You're the first person who's ever asked for it."

When she picks up the book the next day, Shirley is glad to see that all the poems are very short.

On Thursday morning Vera says to Ronald, "I'm going to meet my young lover. I'll be back about six, in time to get your dinner. Then I'm going out with him again."

This is the first time for a year that Vera has lied to Ronald. Dave is not available today, and she is going to the sales in the city. After dinner she will use for the first time the opera season ticket she has bought herself. But she does not tell her husband any of this. The truth might make him suspicious.

Noting that, at work on a poem, he is wearing pale blue again, she says, "Don't forget Mrs. Henderson, your new client, is coming at one-thirty. Better change that shirt if you want to make a favorable impression."

She speaks sharply, as she sometimes does when the subject is business.

Ronald lifts his head. "Sorry. You were saying?"

"From her rather sultry tone of voice, I think Mrs. Henderson would like you in red. An elegant boldness, I suspect, is what she wants in an accountant after her dealings with the stuffed shirts in the city."

It is a busy morning for Dave, who looks forward to a good long soak as just the thing. . . . Shirley, taking some time to consider what to wear to help her tickle Ronald Plunkett's vanity, settles on a flatteringly draped silk outfit in a cool shade of very pale blue. . . . At the sales, Vera is pleased to find that her favorite lavender perfume is among the bargains. . . .

* * *

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After Ronald has wrestled with a poem all morning, his pale blue shirt is clinging to him. He eats the chicken sandwiches Vera has made. Then he soaks for thirty minutes in a lukewarm bath. He admires himself in the mirror. The red shirt makes him look both reliable and bohemian he tells himself as Shirley rings the doorbell.

She too is businesslike, having brought all the papers necessary for him to study her financial position. They spend an hour discussing how he will order her affairs.

Over coffee they talk for a while of more general matters. Then Ronald, with Shirley's agreement, takes a bottle of chardonnay from the refrigerator. Their conversation becomes more personal. Ronald cannot remember when he last enjoyed such an easy exchange of views with anyone, let alone a woman.

Gracefully, Shirley stands up and says,

"Long-spun desire
Is a mosquito coil
Burning from both ends
That meet in ultimate fusion."

"My God," Ronald says, "you know 'Love's Pesticide'!"

"And all the other poems in *Amorous Armor,*" Shirley says, hoping he won't test her memory.

"My humble attempts," Ronald says, "to test the boundaries of the haiku."

"You have achieved a series of masterpieces in miniature," Shirley says as she moves behind his chair.

"Have you yourself," asks Ronald, whose voice has a slight shake, "ever tried your hand at poetry?"

"Poetry," Shirley says, sliding her hand inside his shirt, "is an art that only the male can truly command." She plucks gently at hair and nipples. "And your shirt, this shade of red, is very male."

"My wife—" As Shirley seems about to remove her hand, Ronald adds quickly, "I was going to say that my wife won't be home for several hours. But I'm afraid I haven't any—"

"I do believe," says Shirley, putting her other hand into the skirt pocket of her flatteringly draped very pale blue silk outfit, "that I may have one or two about my person."

Far advanced in a lust of a strength he has never known before, Ronald is grateful for his new client's forethought rather than shocked by it.

* * *

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Dave is surprised that Shirley is not home. He is never to learn that she has forgotten to tell him that she will be out most of the day, first with the accountant he recommended, then at the opening night of *Tosca*.

Assuming that she is running a bit late, he takes out his key to the front door. He drops his clothes in the hall on his way to the bathroom. As the spa fills he checks for any additions to her range of bath crystals and lotions.

"Lavender," he says, spotting a new bottle. He wonders whether it has something to do with their conversation the other day. Knowing Shirley's good nature and her fondness for jokes, he does not let the question bother him.

As he sprinkles crystals on the bubbling water, he slips in a pool of spilt hand lotion that Shirley has forgotten to wipe up. He falls, banging his head on the far side of the spa.

Almost painfully tired after his exertions with Shirley, Ronald takes a bath. He is still lying there an hour later when Vera returns home.

"I think I've had a heart attack," he mutters through clenched teeth.

Automatically helpful, Vera puts an arm around his shoulders. He slides soapily from her embrace. His head goes under the water.

"You'd better pull the plug out first," he hisses when he returns to the surface.

Vera, who has had time to consider the situation, says, "I have a better idea."

Sitting on the edge of the bath, she pushes Ronald's head back under the water. He struggles, but is unable to put up much of a fight. Air soon ceases to bubble from his nose and mouth. Vera holds him down for another five minutes, in case he is playing tricks.

She catches sight of red silk discarded in a corner and does what she has always wanted to do. She throws the shirt into the bath with Ronald. It seems to her that, contradicting the bloodlessness of his death, the silk coils around his body like gory skeins.

"Oh, dear," she giggles, seated again on the edge of the bath, "I sound like one of your poems." She prods Ronald in the ribs, almost affectionately. "Well, I suppose I should ring the police. And I suppose I'll have to miss the opera."

Shirley returns home to find the bathroom steamy with lavender. The spa is foaming so wildly that she does not immediately see Dave

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among the bubbles, but she quickly guesses, from the lump on his head, what has happened. She is regretful and a little shaken, but the watery manner of his death reminds her that there are other fish in the sea.

"Just as well I'm not married," she says. "This would take some explaining to a husband."

She has a brandy before ringing the police.

Shirley is frank with them and is grateful for their lack of fuss. Their behavior confirms her experience that men in uniform are much more sensible than the average husband, although it doesn't do any harm to tickle their vanity a bit.

A fortnight later Vera Plunkett and Shirley Henderson are sitting next to each other at the opening night of *Cosi Fan Tutte,* the second opera of the season. At the interval both are reluctant to join the crush in the foyers. They prefer to sit and dwell on Mozart's expression of the deceitfulness of lovers. The rows of seats around the women are empty. In such intimate isolation it seems unnatural not to exchange a few words.

Suddenly aware that they are both scented with lavender, they turn, at the same instant, towards each other.

"Such a conflict," Vera says, "between story and music."

"After listening to *Cosi,"* Shirley says, "I think I'll never dare trust a man again—though I eventually come to my senses."

"Perhaps it makes men feel the same way about us." Changing the subject, Vera adds, "I was sorry to miss *Tosca*. At the last minute I couldn't come. How was it?"

"No idea," Shirley says. "I had a slight emergency to cope with too."

The conversation lapses for a few moments, until Shirley says, "I hope this doesn't sound dreadfully personal, but the scent of lavender on a woman always reminds me of a man I knew."

Vera smiles sadly. "It has the same effect on me." She wonders why the other woman's voice seems to ring a bell. "You've subscribed for the whole season?"

"Yes," Shirley says.

"Perhaps we should introduce ourselves, since we'll be sitting together."

"Oh, certainly," says Shirley, who loves coincidences and complications and whose mind has been racing ahead of Vera's. "But I have the strangest feeling I can guess your name." ●

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

The names of some writers are inevitably bracketed together in literary history, sometimes placed in real or artificial competition that prods their admirers to choose up sides. Dashiell Hammett pioneered the hardboiled detective novel in the 1920s and Raymond Chandler developed it in the thirties and forties. Asking which was the greater or more important can provoke a lively debate among mystery buffs. Outspoken feminist Dorothy L. Sayers and unpretentious puzzle spinner Agatha Christie were at their mystery writing peak in the twenties and thirties and have received extended critical attention, usually celebratory but sometimes derisive, in the years since. Ask a gathering of classicists which writer made a greater contribution to the form and you'll get a spirited discussion, as you will by evoking their present-day descendants, Ruth Rendell and P.D. James, or American writers of ersatz British detection, Martha Grimes and Elizabeth George. Similar in name and almost exactly contemporary in their writing careers (forties to eighties), John D. MacDonald and Ross Macdonald both achieved deserved bestsellerdom. A Bouchercon panel once addressed the question of which was the real Big Mac. (To dodge choosing between them, vote for Philip or Gregory or William Colt.)

Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky were not the first writers to develop relatively realistic female private eyes, but they have certainly been the most celebrated. Their sleuths both debuted in 1982, Grafton's Kinsey Millhone in *"A" is for Alibi* and Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski in *Indemnity Only*. Grafton has been slightly more prolific. The latest Millhone novel is her eleventh, while Warshawski appears in her eighth book-length case. (If Paretsky were following Grafton's alphabetical title pattern, she would be up to H.)

Both characters are independent professionals in their thirties who jog for exercise, live alone, are divorced, have elderly protective landlords, and confront ethical dilemmas as well as criminal problems. While Warshawski operates in big-city Chicago, imbibes scotch, and dresses snappily, Millhone works in a small California city based on Santa Barbara, sticks to white wine, and has one all-purpose dress for situations where jeans won't do.

Both are certainly feminists, but Warshawski is much more intensely political, her worldview unashamedly if unfashionably liberal. Millhone's politics are both more subtle and more "mainstream." In a sense, the Millhone novels are about the case at hand, while the Warshawski novels are about Warshawski, an angry, somewhat wired person who is both the more complex and in-

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triguing character and potentially the harder to take if encountered in real life. Certainly she continually exasperates her circle of friends, whom she is always exposing to danger, sometimes irresponsibly.

Paretsky writes at greater length than Grafton—Warshawski's latest case, at over 400 pages is almost exactly double what used to be the standard length for a mystery novel—and generally places less emphasis on the formal puzzle. While Warshawski has appeared on the big screen in a roundly-panned feature starring Kathleen Turner, Grafton swears she will never sell movie or TV rights to Millhone and will come back to haunt her children if they do so.

*** Sue Grafton: *"K" is for Killer,* Holt, $22.95. Santa Teresa's Kinsey Millhone is asked by Janice Kepler to find out how (and by whom) her wayward daughter Lorna was killed. Among the clues is a pornographic film in which Lorna had appeared. Kinsey explores the dead woman's circle of family, friends, and acquaintances, a varied and well-drawn bunch, with her usual determination and skill. When you read of Kinsey's final dilemma, you'll realize the title isn't as trite as it first appears.

*** Sara Paretsky: *Tunnel Vision,* Delacorte, $21.95. V.I. Warshawski tries to uncover possible skullduggery in the awarding of a bid to a women's trade collective, find a community service assignment for a powerful client's troubled son, help a homeless family living in the bowels of her soon-to-be-closed office building, and solve the murder of a law professor's wife while clearing their troubled teenage daughter of suspicion. Carrying its Gone-with-the-Warshawski length surprisingly well, the novel is readable and involving throughout, though V.I.'s constant forays into danger, sometimes accompanied by an elderly male friend, become wearing after a while, and the frequent Nancy Drew references are all too appropriate. Paretsky gives a lively title to each of the 63 chapters. (My favorite is "Mal du Père.")

*** P.C. Doherty: *Murder Wears a Cowl,* St. Martin's, $20.95. Hugh Corbett, spy and sleuth in the employ of the mercurial King Edward I, appears for the sixth time in a tale involving a serial killer of London prostitutes some six centuries before Jack the Ripper. Doherty, who also writes historicals as Paul Harding and Michael Clynes, is a throwback to the days when authors like John Creasey, Dennis Lynds, Donald E. Westlake, and Evan Hunter turned out several books a year under multiple pseudonyms. Doherty writes some of the most chillingly effective opening chapters in the genre, and here he carries through with a complex and surprising mystery. But he should banish at least four words from his authorial vocabulary: mutter, mumble, hiss, and murmur.

*** Mary Higgins Clark: *Remember Me,* Simon and Schuster, $23.50. A Cape Cod background apparently brings out the best in Clark. Returning to the locale of *Where Are the Children?* (1975), she tells the story of children's book writer Menley Nichols, subject to panic attacks and flashbacks to the accidental death of

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her son and plagued by unspoken intimations she may be a danger to her infant daughter. Her husband, defense attorney Adam, takes the case of Scott Covey, accused of wife murder. The cross-cutting style works like clockwork; surprises are plentiful; and one minor character, an Alzheimer's-afflicted local historian, is memorably drawn.

*** Les Roberts: *The Lemon Chicken Jones,* St. Martin's, $20.95. L.A. actor and private eye Saxon agrees to look for the Chinese mail-order bride who has run out on has-been comic Nappy Kane. Saxon can out-cook Spenser and at his best Roberts can out-write Robert B. Parker. The relationship of the sleuth with his black adopted son is nicely done, and the book moves through the expected paces with style and assurance. Roberts, a former Southern Californian who has moved to Cleveland, has a jaundiced view of L.A. and manages to salt even this book with references (The Front Row, Brad Daugherty) to his present hometown.

*** William X. Kienzle: *Bishop as Pawn,* Andrews and McMeel, $18.95. Detroit's Father Koesler is another reliable old favorite in above average form. Kienzle's pluses (good clerical jokes, readability, and a fascinating immersion into big city Catholic politics) and minuses (awkward prose and dialogue and hackneyed plot development) parallel those of fellow Catholic novelist Andrew M. Greeley. The account of the murder of Bishop Ramon Diego, brought in to minister to the Latino community but seemingly more interested in schmoozing with moneyed Anglos, provides a better puzzle than usual, with a nice job of reader misdirection.

If your heart belongs to Baker Street, don't miss Marvin Kaye's generous anthology of mostly unfamiliar selections, *The Game is Afoot: Parodies, Pastiches and Ponderings of Sherlock Holmes* (St. Martin's, $24.95). Contributors range from Arthur Conan Doyle himself to *EQMM*'s own Edward D. Hoch and include both the expected (August Derleth, Vincent Starrett, Anthony Boucher, Poul Anderson, John Dickson Carr) and the surprising (Fritz Leiber, Kenneth Grahame, ZaSu Pitts). Several of the pastiches are original to this volume. Kaye's thorough 1971 monograph about the Great Detective as actor, *The Histrionic Holmes* (originally published in a limited edition by Luther Norris), is reprinted in full, including some parts cut from the original edition. Adding to the pleasure are the editor's comments in the introduction, individual story notes, and appendices. Quick with a provocative opinion, Kaye finds current TV Holmes Jeremy Brett's "interpretation . . . an outrage and an abomination." (I strongly disagree, though I confess the last couple of Brett outings have caused me to move Basil Rathbone back into first place in my personal Holmes portrayer rankings.)

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A professor of law at St. Louis University, Francis M. Nevins has a long-standing connection with EQMM. *In 1974, after he had worked with* EQMM*'s founder Fred Dannay on a non-fiction work, Mr. Nevins was invited by Dannay to try his hand at fiction. It was the beginning of a whole new career for the young lawyer, who has since published six mystery novels and many short stories. He believes he is the first crime writer to pen a story about toads, and he may be right. In a field in which animals have figured so variously, we simply can't verify the fact . . .*

TOAD COP

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, JR.

Through the binoculars, through the window wall of the plant room at the rear of the Tudor mansion on the hill, she saw them troop into the park below, five teenagers in sweaters and jeans, a golf bag slung over the shoulder of the boy in the rear, and she shivered. She knew what the lenses would show her before it happened. The same thing had happened, or at least was reported as having happened, ten days ago. She stood paralyzed on the tiled floor of the upstairs conservatory, bathed in flowering plants and spring sunlight, and watched the boys swagger through the grass of the suburban pedestrian park to the oval pool at its center where they formed a ragged single file and the boy in the rear took a club from the canvas bag and passed it to the boy at the front. Motionless as a bird before a snake, she watched the lead boy step forward to the broad flagstone lip of the pool where toads were mating in the late afternoon stillness, watched him assume a golfer's stance and sight on the pair of toads motionless in amplexus at his feet, and swing the club smack into the animals' bodies, his mouth gaping wide in a soundless cackle as the coupled toads sailed as one through the air to the jetting fountain at the pool's center and plunged through the spray into the scummy water. He thrust the club at the next boy in the file and all five shuffled over a few feet to where

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another pair of toads were mating at the lip of the pool. That was what broke the spell.

Detective Sergeant Gene Holt dropped the police binoculars to the conservatory floor and never noticed that she missed breaking a toe by a fraction of an inch. "Dan!" she shouted into the house. "In here! Fast!"

"Where are you?" a muffled voice came back at her.

"Plant room! Hurry, damn it!" She was still shaking and pale-lipped from witnessing the scene with the toads. Sergeant Dan Cameron, the newest investigator assigned to Major Case Squad, clattered into the master bedroom bent forward in a combat crouch with his service pistol thrust ahead of him.

"Put it away," Gene told him. "Come out here and look." Cameron holstered his revolver, looking very young and bewildered, and scooped up the binoculars from the tiled floor. "Down in the park, by the pool," she said. "They're doing it again."

"Killing toads with golf clubs?"

"Just the way someone calling herself Amelia Bardette reported," Gene said, "a few hours before a golf club brained the real Mrs. Bardette."

Cameron screwed the glasses to his eyes and adjusted the focus knob. "I can't . . ." he grunted. "Where the hell's the . . . Ah."

"See them?"

"Up close and personal." Cameron stood perfectly still, feet spread apart. He almost seemed to have stopped breathing. Gene knew he was committing to his prodigious memory every detail of the faces and figures and clothing of those disgusting adolescents at the edge of the pool. If only she'd taken the Squad camcorder with her! "Even magnified like this it looks like they're swatting globs of mud."

"Those globs of mud are living animals like you and me," Gene reminded him, and adjusted her bifocals on her nose.

"You think those could be the same kids Mrs. Bardette or whoever it was called the local cops about?"

"Why don't you go out and ask them?"

Cameron daintily set down the binoculars on a glass-topped wrought-iron table whose surface was smothered with flowering plants. He double-timed out of the room and Gene heard his steps receding as he dashed down the main staircase and out the front door, which he slammed behind him. She retrieved the binoculars, and with a fascination that sickened her she trained them again on the slaughter of toads. Dan would have to sprint down most of the

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long block before he reached the entrance to Bardette Park. Maybe, maybe these would be the boys someone claiming to be Mrs. Bardette had reported to the police on the same day the real Mrs. Bardette was clubbed to death.

Gene had come into the picture that morning, a week and a half after the murder and her first day back at work after the Russian junket. She and some other veteran investigators had been in Moscow conducting a seminar for their Russian counterparts on how to handle the kinds of crimes that were becoming commonplace as the former U.S.S.R. lurched into a free-market economy. By prearrangement she had stayed on for two weeks' vacation after the conference, shuttling from concert to concert, glowing with a religious pilgrim's fervor as for the first time in her life she heard Prokofiev and Shostakovich performed in their native land. On her return to Major Case Squad that morning she found on her desk an ornate Welcome Home card atop a boxful of manila files. Three minutes later she was rapping on the pebbled-glass panel of Captain Andrews's office door.

"Good to have you back," Andrews greeted her without looking up from the medical examiner's report he was reading. "Hope you liked Russia. Hope you're ready to work."

That was his way: better climb into a vat of acid than let a feeling show. But he was the best boss the squad had had in years and Gene had trained herself to ignore even the thick smoke haze that hung in the air in his boxy cubicle. "Thanks," she said, and blinked behind her bifocals against the nicotine. "That—thing on my desk?"

"Murder case from last week. Yours now."

"And why am I so honored?"

"Because it's off-the-wall like the way you approach things." He crushed his cigarette stub in an ashtray already stuffed with dead butts and stretched back until his ancient swivel chair gave an anguished squeak. "You want the Classic Comics version before you tackle the story uncut?"

"If you'd be so kind," she said, and settled gingerly into the splintery torture seat that passed for a visitor's chair. As Andrews pawed mechanically at his breast pocket she cleared her throat like a schoolteacher on the verge of admonishing a wayward pupil. "Sir," she requested, "any chance we could keep the briefing smoke-free?"

The result was that he also kept it very brief. In an oral style that reminded her of the minimalist composers, not the shadow of a flourish nor a wasted moment, he told her of the last days in the

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privileged life of Mrs. Amelia Bardette. Married at twenty-five to George Bardette, who rose effortlessly along the well-greased ladder of the family corporation to become CEO of Bardette Paper Products. No children. Widowed in her early sixties. Her twilight years focused on genteel environmental and wildlife causes and, near the end, on one cause in particular: the welfare of that inoffensive and misunderstood little creature, the toad.

"Bufo bufo," Gene murmured. "The scientific name for the common toad," she explained when she saw the startled look in the captain's eyes. "It just came back to me from college biology somehow."

"This is a case for you all right," Andrews sighed, making Gene wonder if her plain-faced gawkiness struck him as somehow toadlike. He went on to tell of the phone call Mrs. Bardette had made to her local police station on the afternoon of her death, reporting that a group of teenage boys were in Bardette Park bludgeoning toads with golf clubs. Two uniforms had checked out the park that backed onto the grounds of the hilltop mansion where the Bardettes had lived since the dawn of the century. No boys, no clubs, no dead toads. The uniforms had so reported to Mrs. Bardette, who denied that she had seen any animal abuse or made any calls to the police. And that seemed to be the end of the matter until after dark the following evening when a night jogger cutting through the park had stumbled over the body of Mrs. Bardette in the shelter of a hedgerow, her skull smashed in by an instrument which according to the medical examiner was almost certainly a golf club.

Gene spent most of that day at her desk, a midget audiocassette player peeping out of the center drawer, listening through tiny earphones to some of the longer symphonies of Mahler and Bruckner as she hacked her way through the paperwork on the murder. Late in the morning she disconnected herself from the earphones and put in a call to the Sprucewood station and arranged to have lunch in the day room with one of the officers who had responded to what they thought was a complaint from Mrs. Bardette. Even in a ritzy area like Sprucewood the day-room cuisine was likely to be stale sandwiches from a coin machine. On her way out to the station Gene stopped at The Bread Company and bought two turkey and bacon combos on wheat rolls. Patrolman Amos Scott, a broadfaced black man in his twenties with a barrel chest that threatened to burst out of his blue uniform shirt, was properly grateful. After lunch they

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climbed into Gene's gunmetal Sentra and he guided her through the suburb of curving streets and vast manicured lawns to the cul-de-sac which marked the entrance to Bardette Park. As they strode along the paved walkway Gene kept her eyes on the border that surrounded the oval pond in the park's center. It seemed to be dotted by stones, dozens of dull gray-brown stones arranged haphazardly along the pond rim, always two together, a smaller stone atop a larger. It wasn't until she was two feet from the edge of the pond that she saw they weren't stones at all.

"Bufo bufo," she said softly.

"Yes, ma'am," Scott said. "It's still mating season for them."

"They're so—still," she marveled, and wondered how to make the point to a strange man that when human beings and most other animals mated they were, well, more active about it.

"Toads don't have normal sex, ma'am," Scott told her. "I looked it up in a nature book at the library after the murder. What they do is called amplexus. The smaller boy toad climbs onto the bigger girl toad and sorta squeezes her for hours on end and that's how her eggs gets themselves fertilized. They do it for a couple of weeks each year and then they go back into their burrows." He waved a hand to indicate the dense foliage at the borders of the park. "At night they all sing up a storm like crickets or cicadas, only different. More musical. I never knew it was these ugly old toads I was hearing on night patrol till I looked it up in that nature book."

The two of them were alone in the park. Gene looked up and over the hedgerows planted on the west side and along the slope of a hill at the top of which she saw the rear of a slate-roofed Tudor Revival house. No other structure commanded a view of this park.

Scott followed her gaze and her thoughts. "Yes, ma'am," he said. "That's the Bardette place. Her body was found under those hedges."

Gene took off her bifocals and rubbed the lenses with a silicone-treated tissue from her bulging shoulder bag. "The call to the Sprucewood station was logged in on your tape at 4:39 P.M.," she told him. "A lady identifying herself as Mrs. Bardette reported a group of kids swatting these toads with golf clubs. You and your partner were sent over to investigate and you found nothing here."

"Nothing but these toads here," Scott corrected.

"She was the richest lady in the neighborhood, so you drove around to her house personally to tell her you hadn't seen any kids with golf clubs or any sign of animal abuse. What was her reaction?"

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"She was flabbergasted," Scott said. "Told us she hadn't seen anyone attacking toads, hadn't phoned in to the station, didn't know what we were talking about."

"Did you believe her?"

"She sure convinced me," Scott said. "I asked if anyone else was staying there who might have put in the call using her name and she said she lived alone. The woman who cooks and cleans the place was away on vacation."

"Then," Gene said, thinking back to the paperwork she had pored over that morning, "you asked if you could search the house."

"Right, ma'am. Something struck us funny about the whole thing."

"There's a glassed-in back porch off the master bedroom, about eight feet square. She had turned it into a plant room." Gene aimed her finger at the rear of the mansion on the hill. "That's it up there with all the hanging plants showing, right?"

Scott blinked. "I can't see that far, ma'am."

"Neither can I," she smiled, "not even with these specs. It's at least two hundred yards from here to there. So how could anyone in that plant room look down here to the park and make out that these little toads were being killed with a golf club?"

Scott said nothing.

"Only with binoculars," Gene answered herself. "Did you see any in the plant room?"

"No, ma'am. Nowhere."

"Wonderful," Gene summarized. "So the one person in a position to have seen the toads being killed didn't have the means to see it and denied she saw it, and there were no dead toads in the park anyway, but someone reported it. And the next day the woman who claimed she hadn't reported it gets clubbed to death with the same sort of instrument that didn't club the toads." She grimaced in the harsh noon sunlight. "Definitely my kind of case. Come on, let's get back to the station."

They drove back by a different route, along Green Lane, up the slope crowned by the Bardette house, a sedate mansion set back thirty yards from the street in a nest of flowering shrubs. An Audi, a Lincoln with a windshield sticker from a local TV station, and a Porsche whose license plate read LAWYR rested in the porte-cochère. As soon as Gene dropped Scott off at the station she U-

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turned and sped back to find out what was coming down at the murdered woman's house.

Fifteen minutes after ringing the bell she was perched on the edge of a tan leather armchair in the oak-paneled den with the lawyer in the twin chair beside her, the two of them watching quizzically while three younger people—a mop-topped paralegal, a thirtyish woman in a power ensemble, and a balding man in a sharkskin suit and gold cufflinks—systematically shook out the pages of each of the hundreds of books on the handrubbed shelves that lined the walls.

"Our firm represented George Bardette for years," Peter Cavanaugh told her. He had a rubicund Irish face and thick hair the color of pewter. Gene guessed his age at sixty. "When he donated that tract at the foot of the hill to the city on condition they named it Bardette Park, our founding partner Ron Wallace handled the transaction. I was a junior associate when Ron drafted Mr. Bardette's will. Ron's been dead, oh, twenty years now. It was, um, an interesting will."

"I saw something about it in the case file," Gene said. "He left everything in trust for his widow for the rest of her life and gave her a . . . a power of something-or-other over the property."

"Testamentary general power of appointment," Cavanaugh said. "Which means she could determine who came into the property on her death but could only exercise that power through a provision in her will. That of course is the problem we face." He bobbed his head at the energetic trio rummaging through the shelves. They had introduced themselves to her when she walked in and displayed her cop shield. The tight-mouthed blonde in the power suit was Karen Lord, Mrs. Bardette's closest blood relative, a niece. She was the weather lady on the KXOM evening news. Mr. Sharkskin was Jason Bardette, one of old George's two nephews and an executive vice president at Bardette Paper Products. From the case file Gene remembered that the other nephew, Mark Bardette, was a sixties dropout who had left home in his late teens, hitchhiked west, eventually married a Makah Indian girl, and wound up teaching school with her on the tribal reservation at Neah Bay, the extreme northwest tip of the state of Washington. He hadn't come back for his aunt's funeral.

"You don't know if she ever exercised that power?"

Cavanaugh spread his hands eloquently. "We can't find her will!"

"You drafted it for her?"

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"Our current senior partner did, around this time last year. Alan Kirby."

"Why don't you ask him what the will says?"

"Because he's in a hospice, dying. Inoperable brain tumors. Has been for the last four months. He can't communicate anymore."

"Surely," Gene suggested, "you have a copy of the will in the office files."

Cavanaugh's burgundy features showed befuddlement. "It's gone!" His voice rose almost to a squeak. "We've been ransacking the office for days! And with Mrs. Bardette's copy missing too—oh God. It's not in her safe-deposit vault at the bank, it's not with her personal papers here at the house. . . ."

"What makes you think it might be in one of the books?"

"Desperation," the lawyer admitted. "Plus she was getting a bit absent-minded as she got older, and last year when she mislaid some important stock certificates we found them inside one of the art books on her coffee table. History could have repeated itself."

"Suppose you can't find the will anywhere," Gene asked, "what happens to the property she had power to appoint?"

"It will revert back to George Bardette's estate and be disposed of as if he had died without a will. He never had any children. . . . I've never been directly involved with the family, that was Alan Kirby's job, but I suppose the nearest relatives are Jason, Karen, and Mark. After taxes and costs of administration I imagine they will get roughly five million dollars apiece."

No wonder, Gene thought, that neither the executive VP nor the weather lady seemed terribly desperate about the situation. If the will were found they might take everything or nothing but if it remained lost they would each take a dandy consolation prize. Perhaps enough to kill for? Gene knew from the file that neither of them had a puncture-proof alibi for the evening of the murder. Karen Lord had done the weather on the five o'clock newscast and again on the ten, but she had been away from the station roughly between six and nine-thirty—at her condo, she claimed, taking a sorely needed nap. Jason Bardette was supposedly working late at his office, and indeed had signed in on the building's after-hours security register a little after seven, but he could easily have left and gone off to murder his aunt without the superannuated security guard in the building lobby being any the wiser, and in fact he hadn't bothered to sign out on the register when, at whatever time it actually was, he had left. Mark Bardette, as far as anyone knew, was on the

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Makah reservation the night of the murder and ever since, but even in northwest Washington there are hit men to be hired.

Gene was lost in a fog of speculation on these possibilities when her reverie was pierced by a hoarse-voiced shout.

"Mr. Cavanaugh! Mr. Cavanaugh!" The mop-topped paralegal was standing wedged behind a waist-high antique globe at one corner of the den, a bright-jacketed book on amphibian animals in one hand, a blue-backed sheaf of papers in the other. "I've got it!"

Gene and Cavanaugh shot from the leather armchairs and converged with the others on the mahogany desk at the center of the room. The paralegal offered the sheaf to the lawyer as gingerly as if he were handling nitroglycerine, and Cavanaugh slapped the papers open and began to skim the document, eyes darting, lips moving soundlessly, while Karen Lord untelegenically cracked her knuckles and Jason Bardette scowled. When he reached the last page Cavanaugh peered up over his glasses and—there was no other word for it—giggled.

"Come on, come on, you ass," Jason Bardette thundered. "Who gets the property?"

The lawyer permitted himself an ironic chuckle. "Mrs. Bardette's exercise of the power," he announced, "seems to have been an afterthought. It comes at the very end of the will and is handwritten. Ummm—no one objects to Sergeant Holt's presence?"

"Read it!" Jason burst out. "Please," Karen Lord added.

Cavanaugh cleared his throat loudly. " 'The property over which I have power of appointment under the will of my late husband George W. Bardette I hereby appoint to . . .' " He paused to clear his throat again, or perhaps, Gene thought, it was to stifle a laugh.

" '. . . to the Toad Society of America,' " he finished.

As she spun the Sentra downtown with the radio tuned to the university station and Sibelius's mournful "Swan of Tuonela," she couldn't keep herself from chuckling. Not at the music; at the one-liner that had exploded from the taut mouth of Karen Lord after Cavanaugh had read the crucial clause of the will. "I knew the old bitch was bats about toads," she had blurted, "but not *that* bats!" If Gene hadn't happened to be in the room, would the niece and the nephew have quietly made a deal with the lawyer to shred the will and bill them a few hundred thousand dollars apiece for his time and trouble? How much would the paralegal have demanded? No one would ever know. Gene had written out a receipt and taken

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custody of the document as evidence in the murder case.

At Major Case Squad she deposited the will in the clerk's office and took two photocopies for herself. One she put away with the rest of the Bardette files, the other she took into the cubicle of Dan Cameron. "I want your head," she told him. Six-four and slender as a cattail, Cameron had been a pro basketball center for two years before an eye injury took him out of the game and into a new career as a cop. Gene knew he was taking night law-school classes and had seen casebooks on wills, trusts, and estates on his desktop over recent months. "Here," she said, handing him the photocopied will. "I need to know if this is legally sound. Research it in the library, call your professor if you have to. I'll be back in an hour."

The dashboard clock read 2:49 as she swung the Sentra off Olive Boulevard into a drab cramped little suburban shopping center that featured a take-out pizza place, a take-out Chinese place, six vacant shopfronts, and, in the most remote corner, the national headquarters of the Toad Society of America, Inc. She hadn't truly believed such an institution existed until she had seen it listed in the phone book. She stepped in and found herself in what reminded her of a dentist's waiting room: a few stack chairs and battered tables, the cheapest grade of shag carpet on the floor. It was the wall placards that made the difference, dozens of them, all neatly framed and hung with military precision in groups of three, within each frame a different toad quotation. Othello: "I had rather be a toad/And live upon the vapor of a dungeon/Than keep a corner in the thing I love/For others' uses." Kipling: "The toad beneath the harrow knows/Where each and every toothpoint goes./The butterfly upon the road/Preaches contentment to the toad." She had never dreamed so many writers had had so much to say about the little amphibian. She was still studying the platoon of placards when the door to an inner office clicked open and she turned around and saw hopping towards her a lively but wizened old gentleman with wild snowy hair and a manic Harpo Marx glint in his eyes. His tie and slacks were olive drab, his sports jacket mud-brown. Toad colors.

"Aeneas Oxendine," he introduced himself, shyly thrusting out a liver-spotted hand. "You must be the Sergeant Holt who phoned a little while ago?"

"Gene Holt." She dredged up the ID shield from her shoulder bag. "And you're the—what, the chief administrator for the Toad Society?"

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"Chief and only, I'm afraid. It was I, you know, who found all the quotations you see." He gestured proudly at the wall. "The research took *months!* I had them framed at the frame shop that used to be three doors down till it went bankrupt. And oh, the T-shirts were my idea too. You know about them, I hope?" Beaming with delight, he opened the door to a storeroom lined with pine shelving piled high with cotton T-shirts, each featuring a toad figure and an apt quotation. She noticed one from the poet Karl Shapiro: "He is the Puritan under whose tall hat/Evil is nested like an ugly toad." Hardly *les mots justes* if one's purpose is to promote a positive image of *bufo bufo,* she thought. "Who paid for getting all these made?" she asked.

"Why, dear Mrs. Bardette did, of course! She paid for just about everything the Toad Society ever did. I'm afraid we haven't yet become a high-priority cause for the general public like cancer and AIDS." He sighed. "I really don't know how we'll survive without her."

Gene stifled the urge to tell him about the handwritten amendment to the dead woman's will. No sense building false hopes, she told herself, until I'm sure the codicil's legal. Then suddenly she was seized by a wild new thought. Suppose he knew about the codicil already? In her mind's eye she saw Amelia Bardette, an old woman living alone, without children, remote from her relatives, a woman who doted on toads, who had just been told of the false toad abuse report phoned in to the police by someone using her name. Wouldn't she be consumed with fear that next time someone actually might kill the toads in the park pond while they were in amplexus? With whom would she share her fears? Whom might she ask to come out that evening and stand vigil with her in the brush at the foot of the hill behind her house, watching over the animals? Dotty old Oxendine, that's who! And if she had previously told him what she had done with her power of appointment, might he not have taken a golf club to the rendezvous and . . . ? Then Gene looked hard at Oxendine's frail little figure and weak blue eyes and something told her it couldn't be.

"Come into my sanctum if you will." The old man led her into a tiny office cluttered with shelves displaying toad figures in wood and stone and clay and brass and gold and silver and tin, a treeless forest of micro-toads. Toadpoles? Toadlets? Toadlers? She almost tripped over the heavy marble garden toad that squatted at one of the feet of the visitor's chair. "Now how can I help you?"

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Gene simply couldn't admit that she had come to this interview unprepared, that there had been no spare moments in her day for reading whatever in the case file pertained to the man. The only item she could recall seeing this morning was that he was a retired high-school biology teacher eking out his social security checks with this sinecure. "Well," she began, "I know someone from Major Case Squad talked with you before, but . . ."

"Oh, I don't mind repetition." In fact the delight in his quivery voice convinced Gene that he welcomed it. That was when her mind's eye offered another image: of this solitary old man tucked away in a corner of a near-empty mall week after week, isolated as Crusoe. "It was such a shocking thing. And so strange too. That sham phone call to the police about toads being slaughtered in Bardette Park . . ."

Gene risked a bold question without preliminaries. "Did Mrs. Bardette come down to tell you in person about that incident," she asked, "or just call you?"

"Oh, neither," Oxendine said.

An alarm bell exploded in Gene's head. Incredible! Why would she *not* have told him? Despite his harmless-old-duck appearance, could he after all have . . . ?"

"She couldn't, you see," Oxendine went on. "I was hundreds of miles from here that day. In St. Louis, at the art museum. They're running an animal film festival and paid my expenses and a modest fee to give a talk about toads to introduce *The Wind in the Willows*. Not the silly Disney version of course, with Moley and Badger dressed up like Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, oh no, the British movie from 1983, lovely film. Quite faithful to Grahame's book, too." He shut his eyes and leaned back in his desk chair and, transported to a world of his own, began softly to sing. "When the toad—came—home . . ."

That was when Gene's bubble burst. Why hadn't she made time to finish reading the case file before she came here? Whoever checked out Oxendine earlier would have called St. Louis, verified the alibi, cleared the old dodderer beyond dispute. She was sure she'd find it all in the boxful of papers on her desk.

Oxendine was still crooning quietly with his eyes shut when Gene slipped away.

In the deserted parking lot she used the Sentra's cellular phone to buzz Cameron at the office. "I'll be by in fifteen minutes," she told

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him. "Be waiting out front. Bring binoculars." The four o'clock headlines were coming over the Sentra's radio when she swerved into the paved semicircle in front of the police building and Cameron, with field glasses on a strap around his neck, tugged open the passenger door and slid in. "Great timing," he grunted. "What's the rush?"

Gene eased back into the traffic pattern. "We're visiting the Bardette place again," she said.

"Any particular reason?"

She darted into the left lane and passed a string of crawling commuter buses. "Because in another thirty-five minutes it will be 4:39," she said, "which is the time the Sprucewood station received the spurious complaint about the toads. I want to see what can be seen from the Bardette plant room at that time of day." Past the downtown business district, as traffic thinned, she chanced a quick look at her young associate. "What did you learn about the will?"

"It's a dilly," Cameron said. "At first glance it passes muster, but the more you look at it the more you wonder who screwed up."

Gene swung off the main boulevard at the Sprucewood intersection. "Details would be helpful," she suggested primly.

"Here they come. First, is there any problem with the Toad Society being appointed under the will? No. It's a registered corporation with full legal capacity to hold title to property."

"But wait a minute," Gene interrupted. "Wasn't Mrs. Bardette expected to—well, choose a relative or relatives to take the estate?"

"What her husband may have expected her to do is one thing," Cameron replied, slipping easily into his fledgling-lawyer mode. "What his will required her to do is another. The only restriction on the exercise of her power of appointment was that she had to exercise it in her will, which means she could appoint the property to any person or institution in the world except herself. I called the probate court and had the clerk fax me a copy of her husband's will so I'm sure I'm right about this."

Gene nibbled her lower lip between her teeth. "How about the fact that the power was exercised in a handwritten addition to her will? Does that count as part of the will?"

"Yes and no," Cameron replied, prompting Gene to take her eyes off the homeward-bound traffic for a moment and favor him with her let's-kill-all-the-lawyers look. "What I mean is, its being handwritten is no problem. This state still recognizes holographic wills as long as they're dated and signed and entirely in the testator's

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handwriting, which Mrs. Bardette's codicil was, so you'd expect a holographic codicil to a formal will would be okay too. But," he added with the glee of insider knowledge, "my best guess, and my estates professor's too, is that the whole thing will be ruled invalid when it's offered for probate."

"In heaven's name, why?" Gene demanded sourly.

"Because the appointment clause is at the tail end of the will," Cameron reminded her, "below the signatures of the people who witnessed the original formal will. That's a no-no. The state probate code says that a valid will has to be signed by the testator and subscribed by the attesting witnesses."

"Subscribed?" Gene frowned in puzzlement. "Like a magazine?"

"It's a technical term. The state supreme court ruled more than fifty years ago that in a valid will there can be nothing after the witnesses' signatures. Nothing. If anything follows the signatures the whole will's invalid. So the bottom line is, Mrs. Bardette died intestate. Her own property will go to her heirs and the property she had power to appoint will go to her husband's heirs."

Gene's thoughts darted wildly in a dozen directions at once. She said nothing.

"My estates professor told me over the phone that no competent lawyer would have let a client do what Mrs. Bardette did, but he says clients are always screwing up like that on their own and leaving an incredible mess for the survivors to clean up after they're dead."

"I wonder," Gene said. "I wonder if a very competent lawyer indeed wouldn't have told Mrs. Bardette to do exactly what she did." Her thoughts were concentrated now but not on her driving. She swung left at the foot of Green Lane and when they reached the top of the long sloping drive turned in at the Bardette property. The keys from the dead woman's purse admitted Gene and Cameron into the empty house. They mounted the curving staircase to the master bedroom suite and sat in matching velour armchairs in an alcove. Gene had no recollection of having entered the house at all. Her mind was possessed by images, alternative pictures of the murder. Every few minutes, as if in a trance, she would take the binoculars from the delicate rosewood table beside her and march to the glass-walled plant room and peer through the lenses down the brush-choked hill to the green square of Bardette Park. The oval pool, the fountain jetting at its center, the dozens of coupling toads still frozen in amplexus along the pool's rim, all sprang into magnified life.

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After a while Cameron wandered out of the bedroom on a hunch of his own, or perhaps to wash his hands. Gene was only dimly aware that he had gone. When she went through the plant-room ritual for the fourth time, and saw the boys with golf clubs swatting the toads, she was stunned into a sort of paralysis. It wasn't just the casual brutality of the scene, it was that she was watching the false coming true, a fantasy taking on flesh. With all her self-control she broke the spell: cried out for Cameron, sent him racing down Green Lane to the park entrance. She continued to stare through the field glasses dazedly as they revealed Dan bursting into the park and the boys dropping the golf clubs and double-timing for the woods and the one with the golf bag on his back getting his feet tangled up in the canvas and nosediving into the lush grass, where Dan collared him.

It was night. She had no idea how late it was and she was too entangled in the pictures in her mind to read the time on her wristwatch, but she knew that she was at her desk at Major Case Squad and that traffic noise outside had died to a whisper and that the downtown office hives visible from her window were studded with squares of light. She couldn't remember where Cameron and the young prisoner had gone or even whether she'd had supper. But she knew all there was to know about the murder.

A sharp tattoo on her office door roused her from abstraction. Tieless, sweaty-faced, and blear-eyed, Cameron stumbled in. "The kid talked and it checks out," he reported. Only then did Gene remember that he'd been in the interrogation room with the boy and his lawyer. "They heard on the TV news about the fake toad bashing and thought it'd be a hoot to do it for real. No connection with our case at all. Little bastards."

He looked exhausted. Gene glanced at her watch then and saw it was the middle of the night. "Sit down before you fall down," she invited. Cameron dropped like a stone into the visitor's chair. She let him rest for a few minutes while she arranged in her mind the word picture she wanted to paint. Her first words jolted him out of his half-doze.

"Your name is Alan Kirby," she began, setting her bifocals on the desk and rubbing her eyes wearily. "You're Amelia Bardette's attorney. She comes to you and tells you she's decided to exercise her power of appointment in favor of the Toad Society. You're an expert in estate law with all its quirks and glitches. You see a once-in-a-lifetime chance to line your own pockets. What is it?"

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Cameron gave her a blank, befuddled look. "I'm dead tired and I don't plan to be that sort of lawyer," he told her.

"You know," Gene went on, "that if you can manipulate your client into messing up the exercise of her power, all the property subject to the power will revert back to George Bardette's estate and go to George's heirs as if he'd never made a will. Now, who are his heirs?"

Cameron straightened in the chair and blinked. "That I can tell you. Peter Cavanaugh gave you that information. Mark, Jason, and the niece, the weather girl, Karen Lord, right? Three equal shares."

"Wrong," Gene said. "Cavanaugh was wrong. Remember, he hadn't been involved with the Bardette family before. George Bardette's only heirs are the two nephews. Karen Lord is *Mrs.* Bardette's closest blood relative, which means she couldn't possibly be a blood relative of George and therefore can't possibly count as one of his heirs. Right?"

Cameron took a few moments to think back to his estates course in night law school. "Yeah," he agreed finally. "You have to be a blood relative to take by intestate succession."

"And Alan Kirby of course would know that," Gene continued, "so our weather lady is out of the picture. He contacts one or both of the nephews and says: Look, Amelia isn't going to appoint George's estate to you, but I can fix it so you'll get half provided you cut me in for say fifty percent of your share when she dies. Does the picture make sense so far?"

"Sort of," Cameron conceded. "If you could ever prove it."

"We can subpoena Kirby's appointment book and see if he met with Jason Bardette any time around the date of Amelia's codicil. We can get his home and office phone bills and see if there were any calls to Neah Bay in Washington State around that time. My hunch is that he didn't approach Mark at all. Remember, Mark had been estranged from the family for years. From Kirby's point of view, he was an unknown quantity. Would a rational person have made a virtual stranger a proposal that, if it were turned down and reported to Mrs. Bardette, would destroy the man who proposed it? No, in all likelihood Kirby made the offer to Jason Bardette alone. And we know that Jason must have made a deal with Kirby, because otherwise Kirby would have had no motive for giving Mrs. Bardette deliberately wrong advice about exercising her power of appointment. I'm fairly sure he dictated to her the precise language she used in the codicil, because it sounded very much like lawyer language to

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me. Mrs. Bardette added the holographic amendment to her own copy of her formal will and the office copy, which Kirby later destroyed so that no other attorney in his office could possibly pick up on what he'd done. Then he sits back in his executive swivel chair and waits for his client to die."

"But—but wait a minute," Dan spluttered. "Alan Kirby's the next best thing to a corpse himself. Didn't you tell me he was in a hospice with brain tumors and . . . ?"

"This is what they used to call the fickle finger of fate," Gene explained. "Kirby went into the hospice four months ago. His days are numbered. Alive or dead, there's no way he can make Jason give him a penny of what Jason will take by reversion when Amelia dies. So, Jason asks himself, why not see she dies soon? The longer he waits, the more risk he runs that she might consult another lawyer about something or other and find out that her holographic codicil invalidates her entire will. So he formulates his plan. First, he gets some woman to make the fake phone call to the Sprucewood station about kids bashing toads in the park. He knows the police will visit Mrs. Bardette and talk to her about it. Knowing her devotion to *bufo bufo,* he knows that the very idea of clubbing the toads will put her in a fury. He conveniently phones her, manipulates her into telling him about the incident. Does he suggest that they mount guard together that evening in the park, in case the mythical kids come back, or was it her idea? That, I'm afraid, we'll never know, but in any event they agree to form a sort of two-person toad patrol. Then Jason arranges his little alibi for the evening—nothing outlandish, nothing like the detective-story perfect alibis that stand out like W. C. Fields's nose—and goes out to the park with a golf club and kills her. And waits for the law to take its course. Plausible?"

"You've sold me," Cameron said. "So how do we prove it on him?"

"We find the female dupe who made the phone call for him," Gene told him. "We get hold of his golf bag and see if one club is missing or shows traces of blood and brain tissue. We double-check all the houses near Bardette Park and see if anyone noticed Jason's Audi that night. We ransack Alan Kirby's private papers to see if he was stupid enough to commit his deal with Jason to writing. And so on and so on. Beginning now." Then she remembered that it was almost three in the morning and that neither of them had slept a wink. "Eight or ten hours from now," she corrected herself with a tiny smile.

* * *

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Three weeks later, on her first day off after Jason Bardette had caved in under the mounting heap of evidence against him and confessed, Gene drove to the far edge of the county, to the quiet mountainside hospice where, amid the smell of fresh flowers and the sound of birds, Alan Kirby waited to die. She found him in a sunny private room, lying in his bed, covered by a thin blanket, motionless, speechless. There was a vacant smile in his eyes as if he were contemplating with amusement what he had done with his life. He couldn't have known the terrible events his crime had precipitated, but chance had punished him with none of the mercy the law might have shown. Gene gave a tiny nod and left.

That night she wrote a note to Aeneas Oxendine with a generous check for the Toad Society. She asked in return if she could have one of the T-shirts she had seen in his storeroom, the one with a quotation from Sir Thomas Browne: "I cannot tell by what logic we call a toad, a bear, or an elephant ugly." The logic by which she called a human ugly was all too clear to her.

"Our case is up next. By the way, you look great!"

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There could hardly be anyone better placed to write about those slowly burning fuses in the workplace than the author of this story, who has made her living as a human resources professional for a number of years, and hopes soon to start her own management training franchise. The author, who writes under a pseudonym, hails from Marietta, Pennsylvania but lived in Chicago for some time before moving to her current home in Helena, Montana. . . .

THE KEEPER

by SAMANTHA MICHAELS

The phone rings. It is the Keeper. "Have you a few minutes? I need to see you." The tone is pleasant. "Of course. I'll be right up." I force a smile into my voice. I hang up quickly but carefully, not wanting my fingers to linger on the phone, a slim white vile thing waiting to spread contagion onto my skin. I begin to leave the room to keep the appointment, short notice but appointment nonetheless. As I begin to leave the room, my fingers absently begin to search my pockets for loose change. They are looking for a dime. I always keep a little change, which I drop in one pocket or another, no particular pattern to it, so my fingers must check them all. I keep change mostly for the vending machines, for something with too much sugar or too much caffeine, something for the mouth or the head, rarely for the stomach. And I know I'll need change, once in a while anyway, for other things. My fingers latch onto a dime that was hiding in the corner of my left jacket pocket. I drop the dime into the Honey Pot. I sigh. I'll probably need more after the appointment, I think to myself. My fingers find a quarter trying to crawl into the space vacated by the dime. It will do.

I walk past the small partitioned cubicle just outside my own. Carol is not there. I turn the corner and begin to walk up the stairs;

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my feet feel heavy. I wonder what I did, or didn't do. At some point, I'm not sure when, I gave up trying to second-guess the Keeper. She sits at the right hand of our Supreme One. The Keeper whispers into his ears, and he listens. He may be the owner, but the Keeper has the power. When Moses went up onto the mountain to learn what rules the Almighty had for his people, he returned with two stone tablets engraved with ten commandments, ten rules for all humanity to live by. If the Keeper decided to engrave her rules in stone, it would take the entire Teton Mountain Range, provided, of course, the rules were engraved in elite type, single-spaced. And that would be without the moment-to-moment revisions. You don't always know when you break a rule until afterward. Logic is not a factor. I have lost the game of second-guessing. I no longer play.

I am nearing the top of the stairs. I can see her office, the door open. I paint a smile on my face, walk up to it, and knock. The Keeper looks up and smiles brightly. "Hi! Come in." She motions to a plush chair, indicating I should sit. She gets up and closes the door. I wish I could feel nothing. I continue to smile.

As I leave her office, she is speaking to me in the tone of a loving parent who is forced to scold her misbehaving child. I give her the proper look of concern punctuated with a smile. "Yes, of course I understand. I'll take care of it." And I will. I feel the first embers of a headache begin to glow somewhere deep behind my eyes. I should buy stock in an aspirin company.

There are now several people in the hall and on the stairs, each wearing the proper expression, reinforcing the Keeper's motto "Treat each other well." I wear mine. I look at the smiles, into the eyes. A few are genuine, but most match the eyes, blank and empty. People in various stages of despair and confusion wondering what is wrong with them, asking themselves why they aren't happy in such a perfect place. Claire asked herself that. Why couldn't she do things right? Why couldn't she make the Keeper happy when the Keeper was so good to her? You can visit Claire, but only on Sunday afternoons. Joan was crying the day she left and drove into the bridge abutment. The car burst into flames. It was a closed-casket ceremony. And there was Peter. Peter argued with the Keeper. She sweetly thanked him for his feedback. The next day he was summarily fired for "misappropriation of funds." The Keeper was caring enough not to file criminal charges. After all, Peter had his family to think of. Peter still maintains his innocence. Gross misconduct resulted in no COBRA, no unemployment. I saw to that. The Keeper

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whispered into the business networks. Peter, with his prestigious MBA, is delivering pizza for a mom-and-pop place on the south side. I understand the lesson, and I understand the trap.

Near the bottom of the stairs I see the chief clone and my blood runs cold. The clones are the Keeper's spies. Cyborglike creatures, perfect in the eyes of the Keeper, they find out your secrets and report them. No one knows how. I wonder if they can read minds. Absurd, I tell myself. Paranoia. But I try to clear my mind of anything but accepted concepts. I smile and say hello to the chief clone. She stops to "chat," and we exchange some meaningless words. Her eyes pierce my brain. I shudder and hope she does not notice. She does. I tell her I feel chilled. She looks at me quizzically; the stairwell is warm. I smile and tell her I think I'm coming down with a cold. She smiles and nods understandingly, wishes me well, and goes on her way. I begin to contemplate the quickest way to catch a cold.

The smoldering embers behind my eyes begin to ignite. It's going to be a long afternoon.

Carol is at her desk working at her computer. She looks up at me, smiles, and hands me some messages. As I take the messages, I smile at her. "I think I'm coming down with a cold." I may as well be consistent. She makes some appropriate comment and goes back to her computer, still smiling. Upon entering my office, I drop the quarter into the Honey Pot. I feel a sorrow for Carol. She was the first to notice the contradictions as the Keeper rose to power. "Mark my words," she once told me. "She is becoming the keeper of the company and soon she'll be the keeper of us all." "Yes," I agreed, "keeper of our loyalties and keeper of our moralities." And so the name was born, but only between Carol and me. Later, when I began to see the Keeper's powerful assistant as the chief clone, I kept it to myself.

The Honey Pot was Carol's idea. She brought in an ornate covered sugar bowl and suggested we drop change in it any time we had to smile and agree with obvious contradictions. "It will be our joke, and we can use the money to buy ourselves drinks after work," she said. And we did, a few times. But the joke was on Carol. Although technically my administrative assistant, she was given additional responsibilities, some of them for the chief clone. Her work load increased and her deadlines tightened. Then she was given a token increase in pay and phantom decision-making responsibilities, only the Keeper made the real decisions, and there was no more overtime

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pay. I helped do that, too, but I backed off as much work onto myself as I could. I felt guilty; Carol was a single mother and needed to spend time with her kids. I had no children, and my thirteen-hour days could only jeopardize my marriage. Carol appreciated my efforts, but became more and more discouraged, until her thirteen-year-old son was hit by a car. He suffered severe injuries, including brain damage, and was in a coma for two weeks. After that came an extended hospital stay, physical therapy, speech therapy, and absolute trauma for Carol. She had only two weeks' vacation time and could not afford an unpaid leave. She was also facing medical bills far in excess of the insurance. Then the Keeper stepped in. She gave Carol a three-month paid leave and paid for all the excessive medical bills, including a home nurse. Carol was bought and paid for. Her loyalty to the Keeper would never falter. When she returned, she dived into her work and never complained, taking everything with the required smile, although there seems to be a shadow of distance in her eyes. She never again mentioned the Honey Pot, but she did not betray it.

When Carol was off tending her injured child, the Keeper gave the chief clone the project of upgrading the computer systems. The chief clone became gleeful. Within weeks, there were incredible miles of cables and telephone lines worming through the walls and ceilings. I suspect, no, I know, that the worms have additional jobs; they watch and listen. Big Sister watches and listens. The chief clone did her job well. I no longer say anything, not even whispers on the phone, that I would not say directly to the Keeper. Her information is too complete to come only from spies. I am sometimes afraid to think.

Midafternoon I decide to go to the vending machine. I need some sugar and some caffeine. It is going to be a late day, but if I can get enough done here, then I can take the rest home and not come in until Monday. I will put in a full day at home, but if I unplug the modem, I will be able to work without talking to the worms. I wonder if Jeff will be home. Probably not. I think Jeff gave up on me a long time ago. I know someday he will just leave. Not a marriage gone sour, just gone. I will let him go. I have no energy to fight to keep Jeff. I have no right to try to keep him.

I walk into the lunchroom, a medium-sized, brightly lit room with vending machines covering one long wall. There is a sink, two microwave ovens, a water cooler with bottled water, a refrigerator, and a large coffeepot, usually with decaffeinated coffee. I buy regular cof-

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fee from the vending machine. I want the caffeine. As I wait for it to fill I hear a squeaky female voice. "I just can't imagine! How can anyone do that?" "Do what?" I ask. "Why, shoot people!" squeaky voice answers. There are five people in the room on break. All of them seem to be involved in an animated discussion. I look around at them and ask, "What?" Bob from the mailroom answers. "There was another shooting by a postal employee. He just walked into the supervisors' area at the post office he worked in and opened fire. He killed his supervisor, three other people, and himself. He also wounded about five others. This is, what, the third or fourth one? Damn scary stuff." I give Bob a reproachful look. Damn is not on the approved language list. He understands, looks embarrassed, and quietly apologizes. Aura, owner of the squeaky voice, says, "And I heard on the radio, just the other day, that a factory worker took a sawed-off shotgun to work and killed the plant manager and the personnel manager. He told the police he didn't like the working conditions."

I look around and feel uneasy. The conversation is dangerous. I can sense the worms twitching in the walls. I smile at the group and manage a controlled and soft voice. "How unfortunate for all those people. It's too bad everyone doesn't work here where we all treat each other well, and are treated well." "Yes, that's true," Aura says brightly. "Such terrible things could never happen here." The others agree and move on to other topics. Their breaks will soon be over. I have to get change from the dollar-bill changer for the paper money I pulled from my wallet before I left my office. Most of my change went into the Honey Pot. The last thing I will do before I go home is empty the change out of the Honey Pot into an envelope. Sometime during the weekend I will drop it off at the church I no longer attend.

I get black coffee, a cherry pie, and a chocolate bar. I should be fat eating all this, but I'm not. The caffeine and sugar just keep me going. But I will pay. The chocolate will make my pounding headache a blinding one. Maybe I'll hold off on eating it. Maybe I won't.

It is 8:20 P.M. when I finally get home. My headache is blinding. The house is dark. Jeff is not home. I swallow more aspirin, I don't know how many, and take a long, hot shower. I carefully fold myself into the cold bed. My headache begins to ease. I will work tomorrow on redoing my presentation for the meeting that is scheduled for eight A.M. Monday, the presentation that took me a week to do and that

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the Keeper so sweetly told me today has to be changed. As fatigue wraps its hands around me to pull me into an unrestful sleep, I wonder if Jeff will come home tonight.

I wake up early and the bed still holds only me. But Jeff has come home. I find him asleep on the couch in his den beneath an array of his hunting trophies. On the walls is an assortment of antlers and heads from various types of deer, bighorn sheep, elk, and other large wildlife. I used to go hunting with him, though I never shot a trophy. We enjoyed each other back then, and sometimes even laughed. The details of those times have become foggy. I glance around the den. Against one wall is Jeff's gun cabinet. Jeff is not a collector of guns exactly, but over the years he has picked up some nice pieces and keeps all of them in working order. I don't know much about guns except how to use some of them, and I am only a fair shot. Jeff has one rifle that bruised my shoulder the first time I fired it, another that has silver inlay in the stock, two shotguns, and even a black-powder rifle from 1838, a real eardrum killer. He prefers hunting guns, but also has a few handguns. Guns and hunting always struck me as peculiar hobbies for a man as gentle and loving as Jeff is. I look back at him, still asleep. I want to go to him and touch him, put my fingers in his blond hair. I don't. I make strong coffee and go to my computer. I totally disengage the modem and go to work.

When Jeff comes in, I look at the clock. I have been working three hours. I have not heard him moving about the house. He sits down on the edge of the chair across from me. He looks at me. "I love you." His voice is soft. "I know," I answer, looking back at him. His eyes are tortured. He looks down at his hands, unable to look at me again. "But I can't go on like this." "I know." He is almost whispering. "I'm leaving."

I look away from him. "You will be with Monica." It is a statement, not a question. He doesn't answer. I look back at him; he is watching me. "I won't make trouble for you. Monica will be good to you. So will her kids." Jeff looks startled. "Well, you certainly have been taught how to be nice." He means it to be sarcastic. It comes out flat. My stomach tightens, and last night's headache begins to awaken. Jeff gets up and begins to leave. Over his shoulder he tells me he has taken a few things and will get the rest another time. "I'm sorry." My words are barely audible. "I love you." Jeff doesn't hear me. I want to cry, but I don't. The headache is now wide awake. I feel empty, drained. It is as if I have no blood. Maybe I should look

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for vampire bites. But I know who the vampire is, and she leaves no physical marks.

Saturday night I do not sleep, not even the oblivion of fatigue takes me. Sunday night I sleep like the dead.

As I drive to work early Monday, I actually feel rested, something I have not felt for a very long time. I am also ready for the meeting, confident it will go well. And I am looking forward to seeing the Keeper.

I walk into the large conference room, my presentation, notes, and other needed items in my black pigskin briefcase. I smile to the room. People are wandering in, all wearing smiles and good spirits. It is 7:50 A.M. The Keeper is already there. I walk over to her, momentarily pondering whether there are worms in the big, shiny conference table. I put my briefcase on the chair next to her. I say nice, chatty things to her as I pull my presentation out and put it on the wormy table. "I have an idea," I say to her brightly. My hand strokes the cool smooth lines of the object at the bottom of the pigskin. My hand finds the polished wood and my fingers wrap around the handle. The fingers position themselves correctly on the wood and the metal. I am close to the Keeper. As the gun slides out of the pigskin, I hold the Keeper's attention with my big, happy smile. "Let's play post office!"

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DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here's what's left of Jimmy Robb,
Who sold "protection" for the Mob,
He'd tell storekeepers with a frown
That gangs of thugs roamed through the town,
And the storeowners could expect
To have their stores completely wrecked
Unless they paid a monthly fee
For Robb's "protection" guarantee.
"Pay up," Rob said, "before they start
To tear your nice boutique apart."
Thus Robb performed his blackmail job
And raked in money for the Mob.
And then one day he made his pitch
To a little farmers' market which

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Had just put up its modest sign
On Main Street near the county line.
And there the owner, on reflection,
Could not afford to buy "protection."
"We're just beginning here, you know,
With lots of debts that I still owe."
And then he smiled at Robb and said,
"I'll tell you what I'll do instead:
Pay off in vegetables and fruit
And poultry and fresh eggs to boot."
Robb shook his head—but then he thought,
Today these groceries cost a lot
And maybe those I represent
With such a deal might be content
Until this business starts to grow
And can come up with actual dough.
"All right," he said, "on second thought,
We'll give your payoff plan a shot.
Give me some samples to impress
My boss's wife, so he'll say yes."
"With pleasure, sir. This very day.
A dozen farm-fresh eggs okay?"
"He's fond of omelets," Robb replied.
"Give me the eggs—let him decide."

The owner did an expert job
Of wrapping up the eggs for Robb,
Who took his eggs and went his way.
That's why he's lying here today.
Accepting the eggs and leaving the store
And rushing to tell his boss the score
Was the worst mistake Robb ever made,
For one of the eggs was an armed grenade.

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The author of four novels, Lisa Lepovetsky earned her MFA in writing from Penn State University. She is not only a novelist but a published poet and short story writer. Her own many windows on the world seem to have given her a remarkable capacity, which shines through in the following story, for understanding how life appears to those without options . . .

FINDING THE WIND

by LISA LEPOVETSKY

I'd never have thought of murder if it hadn't been for Mother. She hated Jon so much, it was like a sickness. Eventually, something had to be done.

I first met him at the garage one late-September evening. He'd done some repairs on Mother's Buick, and I'd agreed to walk over and pick it up after school. Buicks are nice, sensible cars, safe cars, as Mother reminded me each time I suggested getting something smaller. That's probably why I hated her navy-blue dinosaur.

The sun was dropping behind the trees when I finally got to the garage to pick it up, since I'd had parent-teacher conferences after school that day. The Buick's doors were locked, so I knocked on the garage door and waited. Leaves drifted from the branches like red and gold snowflakes, and I thought I heard a muffled voice from behind the building. I walked out back and found Jon there, tinkering with his sports car. He rolled himself out from underneath it when I wandered back, then wiped his hands on a rag. He stood and raised an eyebrow quizzically.

Instead of asking for the keys to the Buick, I admired his car and asked what he was doing to it. The sullen, bored expression disappeared, and a grin covered his face. He brushed his fingertips gently across the candy-apple red hood. The car was one of those racy late-sixties convertibles, made when speedometers still went to one-twenty and before seatbelts were standard equipment. Jon explained in enthusiastic detail how he'd rebuilt the engine for more power.

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"I can push her to the max from a dead stop in less than ten seconds," he said. His eyes seemed to glow violet as he talked about the car.

My heart beat faster and my mouth went dry as I thought about cruising through the surrounding hills at ninety-plus with the top down. I imagined the wind tearing at my face and the force of the curves pulling me to one side or the other as I shifted into overdrive. I'd never done it—certainly not in a navy-blue Buick—though I'd always secretly wanted to. I wiped my palms against my wool coat.

I admitted to Jon that I'd love to get the chance to try that sometime, and soon we were talking about engines and fast cars and racing. I'd taken an adult education course in automotive mechanics the winter before and knew something about how cars worked. Mother had been furious about it ("Ruthie, young ladies don't fix cars"), until I told her the course was called "Powder-Puff Mechanics." Then she grudgingly agreed it might be useful, as long as I didn't learn too much. But I did. I learned that teaching elementary school wasn't one tenth as interesting or fun as tinkering with the intricate mechanical puzzles that make up the insides of a car. And I learned that at forty-three, I'd wasted a lot of years doing what "ladies" were supposed to do, and would probably waste the rest, too, living with my widowed mother in this tiny Vermont town.

I watched car races—especially the Indy 500—on TV every chance I got and knew about all the drivers and their vehicles. Jon and I agreed on favorite drivers, and what cars they should be driving. Then I heard myself admit that I fantasized about driving in the Indy one day. I immediately gasped, not believing I'd said it. Jon was the first person I'd ever told, and I'd known him less than an hour. I cringed, wondering whether he'd laugh at the idea.

But he didn't. "Oh, man," he said, nodding, "I know just what you mean. I'd kill to get a chance to try that, even once. I love taking off like a bat out of hell and pushing her to the limit. I could lay rubber from here to China if the wheels'd ride on water."

I laughed, and he laughed with me. "I'd like to see that," I said. Then I suddenly felt a little embarrassed, as though Mother had just shown up, standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips, saying, "Ruthie, you're making a fool of yourself." I'd never had much experience with men; in fact, this was probably the longest conversation I'd ever had with a man outside of the school building.

I tried to salvage some of my dignity. "Of course, that's ridiculous. I'll probably never even get to go see the Indy, not to mention be in it."

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"Hey, don't worry about that." Jon's face never lost its glow. "Maybe we don't have a shot at the Indy, but we can get that same feeling sometimes, if we want."

And that's how my afternoons of speed began. He made a date to pick me up at home after school the next day. After the first ride, I was hooked. I couldn't get enough of Jon and our "spins," as he called them. There was nothing romantic between Jon and me—he was more than twenty years younger than I was. We never went to a dance or a movie, we never stopped anywhere for a drink or a snack. We rarely even talked to each other. I doubt we had anything in common other than this thing about speed. Neither of us could live without it. Ours was a love that went deeper than romance or sex. He didn't have to say anything; I could tell he felt the same way.

Even though the wind tearing at you going one hundred miles an hour usually makes it more difficult to breathe, I discovered paradoxically that the faster we went, the more I relaxed, and my breathing actually came easier. I always insisted Jon keep the top down, too, even in cold, wet weather. I'd rather wear a hat and scarf, suffering wind burns and watery eyes, than be trapped inside some steamy metal box, watching the world go past. A touch of claustrophobia, I guess.

Jon was worse. He loved his job, but hated working in the garage in the winter, because he had to close the doors. When the dim light and those four heavy brick walls got to him, he sometimes stood by the little squares of glass and watched the wind till his breathing got easy again. If it got really bad, he'd open the doors again, but his hands got numb too fast. He told me that someone had locked him in a tiny room for four days once, and he'd do anything—kill or die himself—before letting that happen again. I never asked for details; I could see his pain in the way his eyes narrowed and his knuckles whitened on the wheel. Jon was free to tell me or not tell me whatever he wanted.

I didn't burden him with my life, either. The last thing I wanted to think about, racing through the world at ninety miles an hour, was Mother and the life I was trapped in. When I was with Jon, nothing mattered but the moment. That freedom from ourselves and each other was the basis of our relationship.

Sometimes I'd watch Jon as we sped down the mountain, tears streaming down our cheeks. The muscles of his jaw tensed into a tight grin as we squealed around another hairpin curve, each one

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faster than the one before. I understood Jon at those moments like nobody else could have; this was the only time he was really alive, searching for the place the wind starts, and pushing that little red needle to the right as far as it would go.

One Saturday morning near the end of October, I woke late and lay in bed a long time, savoring the day to come. Jon had put a new carburetor into his car, and called the evening before to suggest we try it out by riding up Skillington's Mountain that afternoon if the predicted snow held off long enough. The weathermen couldn't have been more wrong. The sun shone brilliantly through the bare branches across the street, and not one cloud marred the crisp late-autumn blue of the sky. A perfect day for a drive. I hummed in the shower and let my hair hang damp around my face while I went downstairs to fix breakfast for Mother and me.

Mother was already at the kitchen table, watching me like a hungry lioness, ready to pounce. She dropped another spoonful of sugar into her coffee as I sharpened a paring knife to slice up some oranges.

"Ruthie," she said, too softly, "I really wish you'd cut your hair, maybe get a nice perm. Mr. Jeffrey says he'd be only too happy to do you. For a woman in her forties to wear her hair hanging around her face like a hippie seems . . . well, a little pathetic, frankly."

Usually, I let Mother get away with this kind of remark, but I was in no mood for her criticism. I sat down with a bowl and an orange, and began peeling.

"Mother," I said as patiently as I could, "I don't think I'm pathetic, nor do I think other people consider me to be pathetic. If they do, it's their problem." I didn't add that I had no desire for Mr. Jeffrey to "do" me. Doing Mother was probably more than enough for him to handle.

Mother snorted loudly. "That's the kind of attitude you learn by spending time with that, that *mechanic* you hang out with. I suppose you're going out joyriding with him again today."

I clenched my teeth and breathed deeply before answering. I really didn't want to fight. "As I've said before, there's no shame in being a mechanic. And yes, we're going for a drive through the mountains. It's not joyriding. We're not driving a stolen car or anything."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Mother looked at the table as she nibbled the crust from a piece of wheat toast.

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"What are you talking about?" I felt the house closing in on me, and wished it were time for me to leave. But Jon wouldn't be here for at least another half-hour.

"If you recall, I've been telling you that boy is nothing but trouble. Well, he's due for some unpleasant surprises, thanks to me." Nibble, nibble, nibble. She reminded me of a ferret sitting complacently in its cage, ready to bite the first person to come near. Her beady eyes watched me as those tiny teeth chewed at the edges of her toast.

I stopped peeling the orange and casually twirled the knife on the tablecloth. "Stop playing games, Mother, and tell me what's going on."

"A policeman came over here yesterday, asking about what's-his-name. The policeman—a nice young man—said your hoodlum was under investigation for stealing cars, expensive cars. They want to take him in for questioning, but he's been hiding out somewhere the last few days, hasn't even been in to work to pick up his paycheck."

I hated her then, with her self-satisfied smile and her knowing glances. I looked down and realized my knuckles were white around the hilt of the knife. Jon hadn't been to work because he'd been sick with the flu. He didn't know anybody was looking for him.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"I told him, of course, that I would call if that boy ever came here again. I didn't know you were going out with him today, but I have every intention of calling the police before he arrives, and they'll be here to pick him up. Unless—" She broke off meaningfully and looked up.

"Unless what?" I could barely hear my own voice over the sound of blood rushing away from my heart.

Mother was relentless. "Ruthie, this isn't the first time he's done this, stealing cars. He has a list of crimes and phoney names as long as your arm. We'll all be better off when they lock him away—probably for a long, long time. They could throw away the key, for all I'd care. I know I'd feel safer with him off the streets for good."

I didn't want to hear her anymore. I stood, the knife still clutched in my hand. I tried to say something, but couldn't speak. She continued.

"You know, a woman in your position, a role model for young people, should realize it's her civic duty to report wrongdoing. Ruthie, this boy is warping your thinking. If you want to be free of him, really free, you should call them yourself. Make a clean break. It would be best, really."

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I wanted to not believe any of it, but I knew immediately it was true. All I could see was Jon, standing in a tiny concrete room, his face pressed against the wall, trying to hear the wind outside. Knowing he was locked up anywhere would be like locking part of myself in a box forever, too. My lungs seemed to close up, and I thought I'd suffocate.

Then the horn sounded out front. Two short blasts, our signal. I said nothing, but ran out the front door, slamming it behind me before Mother could follow. I knew she was probably dialing the phone that very minute and the police would be after us—after Jon—in minutes.

"What's up?" He frowned as I slid in next to him, moving the familiar toolbox aside to make room for my feet.

"Just drive," I whispered. "Just get us as far away from here as you can."

He hesitated a moment, then he gunned the engine and the tires screamed. As he drove to the edge of town, I repeated what Mother had told me. Jon said nothing until I'd finished. Then he pulled over to the berm.

"Let's get out," he said quietly. "I have to make a phone call, then I'd better get going."

I opened my door and got out. He came around to my side and stood next to me. We just looked at the car, idling over the gravel like a purring cat. I asked where he would go. He shrugged.

"I don't know, north to Canada, maybe. They find me quicker each time. I suppose they'll eventually catch up with me."

He turned and looked into my eyes. "Thanks, Ruth," he said. "I'm going to walk back to that phone booth we just passed and make my call. I don't want to have to say goodbye to you."

I nodded. "I'll be gone by the time you get back. You'd better hurry."

He turned away without another word. I watched him walk around the last curve, and knew what I had to do.

When I got back to the house an hour later, Mother was furious, pacing through the downstairs rooms like a caged tiger.

"I called the police as soon as you'd gone," she said. "But it took a few minutes to get through. I suppose you warned him."

I didn't have to answer, since the phone chose that moment to ring. I knew it would be the police. I put the dirty knife in the

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dishwasher while Mother listened. When she hung up, she straightened her shoulders.

"I hate to have to tell you this," she began, and I almost smiled at her easy lie. "They found your young hoodlum in a ravine a few miles out of town. His car went off the road heading down Wilder's Ridge at about ninety miles an hour, and wrapped itself around an oak."

She added, as an afterthought, "He's dead, of course."

"Of course," I agreed, and went up to my room. There were only two ways out of town—both downhill. By the time Jon reached his maximum speed, the fluid from the brakeline I'd cut would have all leaked out. I just hope he thought of me on that last moment of flight. I still remember him whenever I drive my sports car through the mountains, pushing that needle as far as I can.

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Full of rough-edged humor and unforgettable dialogue, the Colin Harpur stories of Bill James would seem tailor-made for dramatic representation. The author is currently at work turning his book The Detective is Dead *into a commissioned radio play for the BBC, and he tells us that TV and the movies "make constant approaches, and constant retreats." Some day there is sure to be a movie, but in the meantime we hope you'll delight in this new Colin Harpur story . . .*

FOR INFORMATION ONLY

by BILL JAMES

As to grassing, it's not a career you would recommend to your children. No, not quite mainstream, yet surely of importance. You could even say crucial. In any case, few grasses, including this one, have children. The life's too what might be called up and down, meaning full of peril.

There's a murder now in these parts where some grassing—i.e., secretly slipping information to detectives—will be very much to the point, but even if this was generally known, which pray God it won't be, the skills would get no recognition. Obviously, grassing has what is sometimes referred to as a stigma, and even the ones you grass to, and whose front-page glories you create—that is, the police—despise you the same as everyone else. They have a truckload of grubby names for those taking mighty risks in their interests: terms such as "touts," "snouts," "narks," "earholes," "whisperers," and of course "grasses"—these last two being more or less the same, as a matter of fact, taken from "whispering grass."

This particular murder is like a lot of others, a villain exterminated by a villain, or villains. It is the kind of hellish crime where police run into what is always described in the tabloids as a wall of silence: nobody will talk to them, not even the friends and relatives of the corpse. You see, cooperation with police is something they have not been nurtured to, and no matter what happens, they cannot

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change their habits. Now, this is where the grass comes in. He will usually be on what is referred to as the inside—which clearly does not mean "inside," as we sometimes refer to those doing a jail sentence, but on the inside of the communities concerned. As such, he might hear matters police never would. This boy can enter a club or pub without causing all conversation immediate cardiac arrest, which is what happens when plain-clothes police slink in, posing as humans. This murder is very messy and sick, as so many of them are when it's heavy against heavy, or heavies: singular or plural is one of the matters I'm not too sure about at this moment in time, but I'm working on it.

Now, the obvious question is, if most of the people in these communities will not open their mouths to the police, why does the grass, he being also a member of a community? Why does he defy the local culture? This is some poser, and, to be frank, it's where treachery comes in. Your true grass is a loner, but a loner pretending to be one of the band. A guise is what this is sometimes referred to as. It is not easy to keep up. After a few unexplainable arrests, some in the community may suspect or half suspect a certain grass is, well, a grass. But as long as they don't know it for sure and totally, the grass is usually safe. Safeish. It's an uncertain kind of career, though, there's no denying it—not at all like working in local government—which is why at this stage I would not think of marriage or a family.

To answer the question, then—why does a grass grass?—let's approach it from the side: a grass—this is to say, a decent-quality, experienced grass—is selective. He does not blab, blab, blab about every bit of criminality he knows of. He makes what could be termed a moral judgment. Example: he might not say a word anywhere about a burglary where nobody is hurt, and where insurance will take care of all losses anyway. This is even if the takings run into hundreds of grand. A grass is not like some priest or Bible puncher, pursuing an all-out holy campaign against every sin. His and theirs are quite different professions, though all worthwhile. As a matter of fact, I prefer the name "informant" to "grass," and to any of those other crude pieces of slang, informant having a weighty, rather civic sound.

But take this murder. The location is a children's playground in a public park, which gives a rather gross tinge from the start. Surely, there are some pieces of territory which should never be involved in crimes of violence and where everything to do with a

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murder is totally inappropriate. Think, for instance, of the gardens of a convent containing the pious, or the surrounds of a gallery which is filled with wonderful and timeless paintings—eminent names like Velázquez. Or think of this innocent children's playground. Yet, the fact is, here you have a number two or three in one of the local drug, pimping, and protection outfits pinned to the soil by a metal stake through the mouth and coming out at the back of his neck and into the earth to a depth of a full nine inches, unarguably sledgehammer work. That is my information—held back by the authorities from the press and broadcasters because of its acute unpleasantness, but discoverable to those like myself, for whom it is, if such a phrase is permissible in the circumstances, bread and butter.

Now, this is the sort of death nobody needs. This is the sort of death that would be out of order enough in the middle of a remote field or on the mud flats, but when it comes to Cedric Lyndon Chivers he is discovered naked alongside that harmless chunky green-and-red-wood climbing-frame of the play area, and not so very far from the very smallest slide, meant for dear little toddlers.

My understanding is that, despite a gunshot wound in the chest, the forensic people say he was alive when that stake was forced into his mouth and thumped through. (The point about grasses—at least, about those of a certain stature—is that information moves two ways: mostly *towards* the police, of course, but this and that *from* the police, as well.) These findings could mean he was shot and disabled somewhere else, then brought here and throat-pinned in that barbaric fashion, copied, as I've heard, from the Vikings, who were famously short of what is known as compunction. Imagine the kind of mind or minds that would make a special effort to give Cedric this display in such a normally carefree setting.

This is my point about selectivity. Who's going to tell me that the perpetrator or perpetrators of the outrage should be allowed to hide behind a so-called wall of silence? I ask you, who? This is culture? Certainly not culture a chairman of the Arts Council would appreciate, or the late Dame Margot Fonteyn. Does anyone comprehend how those close to Cedric—business colleagues, as it were, or parents, who live locally—could keep quiet about what they know or suspect? With glossy first names like these—Cedric Lyndon—it is clear that the parents had bright hopes for their child. They certainly did not visualize this kind of unsightly end. Yet my information is that they will say nothing about his last known movements, nor about special enemies. To the press, they commented that they

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had no idea who could have done such a thing to their beloved boy, because he was so all-round popular and good-hearted, with a lifelong interest in the breeding of Sealyhams, those piss-everywhere white dogs with a big head and very short legs.

Grassing—you will be beginning to see—has its virtues, in fact, has its indispensable side, even if it will never bring a knighthood. Grassing in this kind of situation is a discreet public service. Surely it is reasonable to open one's mouth if another mouth has been prised open and a lump of steel rammed through it. Of course, I am not saying that Cedric's friends and relatives believe the murder should be accepted and forgotten about, and that this is why they make no disclosures. Here, again, we have a major point to do with grassing. Those who worked with and/or were even fond of Cedric—not easy, because he was a towering shit heap—those linked to him, I say, one way or the other, regardless, will look for means to put things right, as their evasive lingo goes. That's to say, vengeance. One reason they tell the police nothing is because these people want to deal with the problem themselves. This is referred to also as sorting it out.

Which suggests a kind of warfare—the gang kind. Society at large wants that? I take leave to think not. In war, all sorts can be hurt, not just the participants. You might get bullets on the busy streets, fast, murderous cars, even explosions. Is anyone going to tell me that there is no duty to prevent this happening, if at all possible? Who can do it but the grass? Obviously, police have a rough idea of who's in the gangs and how they operate and who might have been stalking Cedric. Rough ideas and might have been are no use to the courts, though. And they don't tell you where the next outbreak of bloodstained trouble might come. These, again, are matters that the grass can often assist with very materially.

A further important point is that revenge can be merely approximate. People get hit, yes, but are they the right people? What revenge is often referred to in books of quotations and so on as is "a kind of wild justice," which comes from some top-class thinker. Notice that "wild." This is not a controlled, proved matter. This is instinct stoked up with hate, obviously involving a big danger of mistakes. This is hardly the venerated jury system, with its "If you please, my Lord," plus wigs and innocent until proven guilty. But the grass can introduce that other element, the exactness, the rightness, the facts—well, the justice. Isn't his a vital role? (By the way, women don't seem to take to it much.)

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Police will know, naturally, that this showpiece deterrent death is something to do with mishandling of drugs or profits by the late Cedric Lyndon, probably coke, maybe crack. It could be overmixing stuff with filler, or selling higher than is accounted for and holding back a juicy personal take, or even using some of the merchandise himself, then starting to mind-float and getting careless, and maybe doing some silly talking or, possibly, losing part of the consignment in a club or slag's room. This is the sort of important detail that can come a grass's way if the grass is on what is known as the *qui vive* and is fairly well trusted all round.

I will not hide the fact that one's own activities may, of course, benefit as a result of successful grassing. The rather coarse saying, "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," does have a bearing. Grassing is not entirely a selfless public service like the Samaritans. This mutual relationship need not always mean the passing of money from the police, but there can be a certain useful absence of pressure, instead. Example: there is an art dealer called Jack Lamb not far from here, generally thought to be a top-flight informant, and he goes from strength to strength, even though some of the works he buys and sells on the quiet could come from anywhere, meaning deeply illegal. Yes, what is known in the art game as provenance—signifying how the painting was got and where from—is assuredly not one of Jack's strongest sides. But, on account of grassing, he has other assets, such as the cop he talks to, who offers a certain powerful influence on Jack's behalf. Myself, I do a little commerce in various commodities, at a much lower level than Jack Lamb, obviously, but I admit there is sometimes a doubt or two over by what means certain items I have for sale originally came onto the open market. All right, maybe from theft. But, within reason, curiosity relating to these is not pressed by detectives. They are responding to my established ability to put helpful matter their way—often referred to in the eventual successful trials within the police-witness phrase "acting on information received." Hence my preference for the term "informant."

Harpur said: "Francis Garland has a small-time but sometimes reliable grass, sir, who's now reporting that Cedric was done by Gordon Hamm and Antichrist Jessop—sorry, Jeremy Lisle Vincent Jessop."

"I want someone else for that. Don't we want someone else for that, Colin? Can we shut the bugger up?" Iles replied.

"Which bugger?"

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"What?"

"Well, the grass or Francis, sir?"

The assistant chief constable, who was bent forward over the desk examining some blemish on his wrist, nodded his fine grey head to acknowledge a fair point. "I meant the grass. But you could be right. Garland's the very model of a thrusting detective chief inspector and naturally wants his discoveries given due weight."

"Especially when they could be true, sir."

Iles held his hand under the direct beam of the table lamp and stared harder. "Nothing genito-urinary first shows itself on the wrist, does it, Colin? Of course, you'll know that pox need not be just a simple trousers job."

"I can probably explain our tactics convincingly to Francis."

"Yes, do: explain them to him very convincingly, Col. We have someone else well and truly in the frame for Cedric, and don't want to be messing about with nobodies. Not at this stage. Can we take the grass in, to keep him quiet? Presumably we've been going easy on some of his own shady work as quid pro quo? We could stop blind-eyeing and get him celled? That would be one answer."

"Well, it's much against the spirit, sir. The grassing code."

Iles raised his head and smiled. It was that saintly smile he sometimes graced the world with, a different species altogether from his more usual Herod smile. "True, Colin. Commitments. Grasses are rubbish, but they're *our* rubbish."

"This grass talks exclusively to Garland, sir, so perhaps there is no real danger of word about Hamm and Antichrist getting out."

"He talks exclusively to Garland as long as he sees some response. But if not? He's got information to sell. The press?"

"The press can't risk libelling Gordon Hamm and Antichrist just on the say-so of a grass, sir. Jessop's got social status. He wears handmade suits."

"Jerk," Iles replied. "No wonder you're stuck at chief superintendent. Newspapers could still unleash their bloody specialist investigative people. They think they can find their way round libel, and often can. Look, I want Martin Gabalfa for Cedric Chivers's death, not a couple of hacks like Gordon Hamm and Jessop. And Martin did quite possibly give the orders for it. Press people, digging away, crowding, interviewing—they could very soon screw up the whole thing with red herrings."

"Meaning with what might be true, sir?"

"Colin, what's true—"

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"Is what a jury believes."

"Is *still* what a jury believes—even after the Birmingham Six. We've built a sweet and almost full case against Gabalfa, yes?"

"Not bad."

"All right, perhaps he didn't personally do it, but will we ever nail him for the foul things he does personally do?"

"Probably not, sir."

"Including deaths?"

"Including deaths."

"Perhaps not this specific death, but enough others. Many others?"

"Almost certainly."

"I like your modest way with words, Harpur, you snivelling, quibbling also-ran. So, Col, if this is looked at intelligently, dispassionately, I'd say take the grass in for a while on something fairly minor, but definitely not bailable. Or even hint we'd leak a rumour to Gordon and Antichrist that he's shopping them. That should keep him quiet. We can do Gordon and Antichrist for something else when convenient. This is clean-sweep, strategic thinking—the long term. It's what's expected when you reach my rank, Col, which you never will, of course."

"Well, I might be able to manage this business some other, less painful way, sir. I'll get Garland to let me see the grass and have a chat. It might take a few days to persuade Francis, though."

"Manage it how you like. Manage it."

What's known as sacrosanct, almost holy, is the relationship between a grass and his cop contact. This is totally private, one-to-one, what is sometimes also referred to as symbiotic, meaning they depend on each other. So I was more than surprised, you could say enraged, to see my police contact, namely Detective Chief Inspector Francis Garland, turning up to a secret rendezvous in certain disused railway carriages on a siding with another cop accompanying—viz., his boss, Detective Chief Superintendent Colin Harpur. This one was known to all, and, as police go, is straight in many ways, but also sharp and hard and, anyway, constantly leaned on to bend rules by that real piece of evil and merrymaking they've got down there, ACC Desmond Iles, i/c Operations—without anesthetic.

"Well, I've heard with admiration of your work," Harpur said. "You're totally anonymous to me, of course. Francis wouldn't ever reveal an identity. But the outline of your career is impressive and

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it's a golden comfort to us desk-based creatures that we have someone in the field like yourself."

The word "golden" I like a lot. It always sets up a promising aura, so I listen carefully. This carriage still had little patches of upholstery unvandalised, and the three of us sat spread around, avoiding the released, high, upthrusting springs, Garland at one corner, myself in another, and Harpur in the middle. He has that way of looking at you, even in this half dark, so you feel it hardly matters a damn he doesn't know your name, if he really doesn't, because he could find you straight off in a football crowd. As a matter of fact, he's the one who looks after Jack Lamb.

Garland said: "Sorry I had to bring company. This has become an intricate matter. Higher authority was required."

That sounded typical cop-shifty, so the thing was to let them know straight off I'm no pushover and had only that day picked up extremely recent and sensitive matter. "The whisper I have currently is that you want Martin Gabalfa for this death, Mr. Harpur. So, I'm a nuisance, am I, coming up with the certainty it was not Martin but Gordon Hamm and Antichrist?"

I listened to Harpur bring a wry chuckle out of his *Make Your Own Self-Confidence* kit. "You say 'certainty,' and I'm sure you believe this, but we have some very strong evidence against Martin Gabalfa," he replied.

"Planted? It's got to be phony. I can put you in touch with someone who'll say he saw two men carrying Cedric to the children's playground. The descriptions are Hamm and Jessop, to a T, Jessop in grand tweeds."

You see, the grass must be able to stand his ground and speak his mind, regardless. Integrity and strength of character are so central. With police, you have all sorts of currents flowing, some murky, some liable to carry the facts away. Police like to what they call orchestrate information, which means arrange it to do the severest damage to the biggest people who have been messing them about, and Gabalfa is very big, Most Wanted.

"I've told Mr. Harpur what you say," Garland replied. He sounded fed up. It looked obvious he was getting squeezed to do it Harpur's way. Clearly, this was out of Garland's hands. He might be a whiz kid but even a whiz kid can only whiz as far as the system lets him because it is the system that decides whether he is a whiz kid or a nuisance.

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"To us, it doesn't look in the least like the style of Gordon and Antichrist," Harpur remarked. "Would they do a stake through the mouth, for Heaven's sake?"

"Have enough been found like that for it to be a recognized style then?"

"And you say you have descriptions," Harpur sort of replied. "Descriptions are fine, but any lawyer worth his breakfast can pull them to pieces. Okay, Antichrist likes caliber tailoring, but so do a lot of other people."

"Not Martin Gabalfa. He's a ready-made and bomber-jacket man." A worthwhile grass does not get pushed off his facts by Harpur-type, bully-boy argument. "This witness has good eyesight. They were not moving very fast, humping a body."

There was a pause and deep breathing, which with police always means, Look out, shit's going to fly.

"Mr. Iles is very interested in your situation," Harpur remarked nice and gently.

"The assistant chief? Himself?" That's what I mean about the pause. Christ, this was a development. You don't tangle with that one. "Mr. Iles? My situation?"

"To be blunt, your safety," Harpur replied.

"I know how to keep my head down."

"What I told the assistant chief, and so did Francis. All the same, he frets over you. To be specific, he worries that Hamm and Jessop might hear you're putting this story around about them, grow understandably resentful, and decide to instill eternal silence."

"Might hear I'm talking? Might hear how?" Which, of course, was not answered and never would be, no matter how long and loud I shouted.

"This is Mr. Iles's main anxiety," Garland said. "He would be very upset to lose you, or any part of you—thinking of your valuable work in the future. It's why Mr. Harpur came with me. Personal security of a threatened individual requires at least a chief superintendent."

"But I haven't been threatened."

" 'Threatened individual' is a category," Garland replied. "You qualify. Oh, very, very easily."

"Mr. Iles wants you to think extremely carefully about your safety," Harpur remarked. "Possibly even go away for a while. Certainly return eventually, say after Gabalfa's charged, or wait until conviction, but take a trip now."

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"You're telling me that Iles would get the information to Hamm and Antichrist that I'm naming them? My God. This is behaviour for a policeman, even Iles?"

Ignored, also, as you'd expect.

"Lie low somewhere distant and congenial," Harpur continued. "Not that I would dream of asking you to finance that yourself."

"This is another reason for the attendance of a senior officer, you see," Garland explained. "Large money concerned."

So "golden" did bring a hearty message.

Harpur produced a fat official-looking sealed brown envelope and put it on top of one of the exposed curly metal seat springs, like an upside-down view of some big fish on a line. "This would help take care of expenses for quite a time, as long as you don't choose the King George V Hotel in Paris. We keep a safety fund for our most distinguished helpers. It's the least we can do. And, look, you can be confident we won't start poking into those business activities—which I understand from Francis you have—looking for the dubious and prosecutable. That little enterprise of yours will be there intact when you return."

Now, this is what's known as a major change in the picture. As will be obvious, I regard my grassing as a serious, worthwhile function, and the really responsible operator must take a very wide view of matters. There is no question that Martin Gabalfa has been a foul menace to the public good for an age, and deplorably able to make a monkey of law and order in all the run-of-the-mill modes—pushing drugs, killings, extortion, running whores. Probably, he gave the instructions for Cedric, including the methods. This, in fact, is beginning to look very much like a case where that matter of selectivity which I mentioned earlier will come in quite strongly. Clearly we have here a question of deciding how the interests of society will be best served and, considering everything, it will indeed probably be most useful if Gabalfa rather than Hamm and Antichrist is put out of the way. I like to think that Cedric himself—even such a bleak, fully paid-up arsehole—would feel consoled to know his terrible death was not entirely in vain, and that a large-scale, ungovernable rogue will probably be removed from circulation as a result. Further, some months in Portugal—not that glitzy Marbella dump where every bugger goes—would be very welcome, as it happens. Restorative.

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Interestingly, Gordon Hamm and Jessop were in the club that very evening after my meeting with Garland and Harpur. Antichrist came over at once, wearing one of those brown and green check ensembles costing about fifteen hundred quid, including high-buttoned waistcoat, and grinning amiably the way he has, like a gashed refuse-bin. This sudden approach was gravely worrying. Grasses whisper but whispers get around about grasses, too. Things could happen very abruptly in that club, and they deliberately had tile floors now and no carpets, because of previous indelible staining. Antichrist remarked straight away: "Do you know, we heard, Gordon and me, that we was temporarily top of the short list for that Cedric thing, but suddenly the heat's right off. A relief."

Replying, I remarked: "I should bloody think so. Something unseemly like that your style? Don't make me laugh."

"Harpur wants Gabalfa for it. Correction, Iles wants him, which is even worse—worse for Gabalfa, I mean."

"Oh, I hadn't heard any of this," I responded.

"We'd feel better if the focus stays on Gabalfa. You hear anything at all that might affect this? Been picking up any drumbeats? Gordon and me, we had an idea you might be doing some personal investigating."

"Me? Not a sniff. How would I? I'm home all day getting ready for a holiday. The Algarve. Packing my bucket and spade."

"Nice. Expensive?"

"A bit, but I had this sudden feeling I deserve a break."

"I think so." Antichrist put his hand inside the lovely county-set jacket and came out with a rather Woolworthy cream envelope, but definitely not the smallest kind. "I'd really like you to have a great time abroad. What with the wine and screwing and so on, it's bound to cost." He passed the envelope over. "Gordon thinks the same."

"This is kindly, Jeremy." Gordon glanced across from the bar and I gave him a grateful wave.

Antichrist said enthusiastically: "What I gather, the Algarve is at its very best this time of year and for quite a few months ahead, also. Once they're over there, people want to stay, just can't break away to return home."

"Exactly what I've heard myself, as a matter of fact." ●

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The Final Paragraph

ONE MORE QUESTION

by Henry Slesar

Winocki County Chief of Police Mike Wiley, eager to recount his latest triumph in crime detection, always looked forward to Detective Dime's occasional fishing trips to Lake Winocki.

"It's true enough," Wiley said with a twinkle. "Not much petty larceny around here. When my people commit a crime, it's usually a big one, like homicide. But they never get away with it."

Detective Dime cleared his throat and said: "Of course, there *was* the Gibson case."

Wiley bristled. "That wasn't homicide! It was a hunting accident. The man shot himself with his own rifle."

Matt Gibson had been killed last August, but the body had remained undiscovered in the dense woodlands of Winocki for almost a year. Dime remembered the case with interest, mostly because of Mrs. Gibson, Matt's estranged wife.

"Sure, she hated him," the chief said. "But they'd been separated almost two years. She traveled all the time. She wasn't anywhere near the lake when it happened."

"You're really sure about her alibi?" Dime asked.

"Of course I'm sure. I questioned the witnesses myself."

Dime remained silent. On other occasions, he had hinted that sometimes the chief failed to ask *enough* questions. As if aware of his thought, Wiley grinned ferociously.

"I telephoned Mrs. Gibson at her home in Michigan," he

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said. "Her two house guests were her witnesses. They swore that Mrs. Gibson was with them at the time of her husband's death last year."

"They were house guests—which means they were friends?"

"Oh they were friends, all right," Wiley said smugly. "But you couldn't have asked for more reliable testimony."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you why," the chief said, chuckling openly. "Because one of them is *Sister* Edna Williams. And the other is *Sister* Mary Morrison. And they both swore to me that Mrs. Gibson spent the entire summer with them at the Convent of the Holy Name. Now do you *still* think she might be her husband's killer?"

"I'm afraid I do," Detective Dime sighed. "It's just as I've always told you, Mike. You should always ask one more question.

"I'm sure the Sisters told you the truth," Detective Dime said. "Mrs. Gibson did spend the entire summer at the Convent of the Holy Name. But you should have asked where the convent is located. I think you'll find it's Queensland, Australia. The summer they meant was winter here."

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a *NEW* short story by

BLANCHE BOSHINSKI

Denverite Blanche Boshinski gleaned some of the information for the following story about birds of prey from her daughter, who is the program presenter for the Raptor Education Foundation. Ms. Boshinski is the author of four previous stories for EQMM, *most of which, like this one, involve a teasing moral dilemma . . .*

THE IMPRINTS

by BLANCHE BOSHINSKI

Air blasts through the open car window and sears my face through its short, reddish beard. But in spite of the heat, my white '64 Biscayne hums as it splits the dry wind and heads north down the long grade of Raton Pass toward my confrontation with a six-year-old corpse.

When I was a kid, the one good thing my older brother Kane did for me was to teach me how to rebuild any clunker he talked Dad into hauling home. This old Chev has brought me to the Southwest all the way from Chicago.

Driving over the rolling, sage-studded prairie, I tell myself I'm here because I owe it to Kane to find out where Bev hid his body, to mark the place with my mind, if nothing else.

"Hey, you don't owe Kane," I contradict myself with a derisive snort.

What I really want, if I'm honest, is a talk with Bev Durant. She shares my grisly secret, and a lonely secret grows hungry. Mine's been gnawing for six years, and at twenty-five I've got the colitis to prove it.

Yet I've always wanted to believe in a just world, and I sometimes wonder if I have more coming to me than a stomachache.

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Maybe Bev couldn't tolerate the guilt and has told the sheriff, or will someday.

I need to know. It's not fair to marry my wonderful, loving Jan if one day a cop will come knocking on our door.

"Charlie," I tell myself, "you may be waking up trouble that's been put dead to sleep."

So be it. A business trip has brought me back here, and I can't leave without making a stop at the Raptor Haven.

I speed on north and watch for the exit sign to Basin Verde.

Green Basin was a misnomer six years ago when gnarled Moses Romero picked me up that late summer afternoon in his rust-scarred truck when I put out my thumb just south of the Colorado state line. I bet it's a misnomer today, unless the Sangre de Cristo range to the west has allowed a miracle and a bit more moisture flows over its towering peaks onto this semi-desert land.

"Too late in the day for you to keep moving," Romero had said as the truck rattled off the highway. "You can get supper and a bed in Basin Verde."

I agreed. I had a couple of blisters that needed rest.

"Not much else, though, for a young city fellow like you," he told me.

With six months of bus travel and hitching behind me, I didn't know how the old man pegged me as an urbanite. But I was, and I couldn't think of a worse life than living in barren places like these isolated spots of humanity I'd seen the last few days.

Romero's truck jerked to a stop in front of the Eden Cafe, a couple of blocks from a scattering of squat houses clouded with dust.

I slid from the cracked seat, pulled my sweat-stained backpack along with me, and said my thanks. I gave the sagging truck door a hard slam.

Romero leaned over to call out, "My daughter Kate's the cook. Try the tamales and chili."

As the gears gnashed their broken teeth, I yelled, "Wait!" and ran beside the truck until it stopped. "Would you mail this for me?" I pulled a bent envelope from among the paperbacks in my pack. "It's a card for my grandma's birthday."

Romero nodded and took the card. "You need eating money?"

I shook my head. "Thanks anyway."

At that time, I'd been running east, south, and finally west, but I still had more than five hundred dollars in my pack. I figured I'd cheated myself, not Kane, with what I'd withdrawn from our book-

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store's accounts. The store was half mine. After Dad's car accident, his life insurance made the down payment.

But fair or not, my taking off would be an excuse for Kane to come after me. Fear had goaded me into running. His escapades were becoming more and more bizarre. The day would come when he'd kill someone and implicate me. Twice I'd been picked up at the store for interrogation and had one night in jail when Kane pointed a finger at me after one of his wild rampages that he always wormed his own way out of.

Kane drank too much. Mentally he was a sick man, but at that time I didn't know what to do about it.

That's in the past.

I see the exit sign. BASIN VERDE. 1 MILE.

Onto the ramp, make the left over the highway, wind northwest for three miles. My insides knot.

The small cafe still sits on an asphalt slab back from the pitted road. The Eden special of the day, announced on the dusty window in uneven letters, is Dogs and Beans. Norton's gas station next door is boarded up, and a mobile home with droopy marigolds around a broken door decays west of the cafe.

Inside at the counter, I order the 24-hour breakfast, two eggs over medium and a short stack. This time I know better than to order the tamales and chili. Maybe that's what ruined my digestion, not guilt.

It's at least 100 degrees inside the Eden. A ceiling fan stirs the greasy odors hanging over the counter and the four tables lined up along the smudged windows.

"Is Bev Durant still around?" I ask the sullen teenager as she pours my fourth cup of muddy coffee.

"Where you know Bev from?" a fat man in a tight western shirt calls from down the counter.

"Just around," I reply. "Is she still at the Haven?"

He laughs. "Where else? Who'd put up with that prickly bag of bones except a bunch of crippled vultures?"

Back outside again, heat waves undulate off the prairie. The low houses in the distance become part of a hellish mirage. I almost expect to hear Bev's gravelly voice behind me, a six-year-old rerun: "Nice evening."

I'd come out of the Eden after downing the chili and had stood looking toward Basin Verde. Romero said I could find a bed there.

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I turned to see the lanky woman who'd been at the table near the open door.

"Bev Durant," she said.

I shook her offered hand. Pork rinds don't come much drier. Her long thin legs were decked out in faded cutoffs at the upper end and mismatched running shoes at the other. Scorched blond hair, chopped off unevenly around a thin browned face, helped make her age unguessable. Thirty? Forty? An old woman from my nineteen-year-old viewpoint.

"Charlie," I responded.

"Drat! I hoped it was Nick." No smile. "Like in Saint Nick, who brings whatever you ask for."

"I can change my name."

"Okay, Nick. I can't find a man to do mean, dirty work," she said. "Room, eats, and some pay."

"Is the food better than this?" I nodded toward the Eden.

"I supply the cans. You ruin it any way you like."

As she spoke, Bev strode off toward a dusty pickup.

A breeze scattered sand around my boots. The sun, already below the ragged horizon, reflected bits of fire up into the few clouds drifting over the peaks. The landscape settled itself into dusk.

I needed a break, even if it was in a subdivision of Hades.

"I'll do it," I called.

I thought this could be one of those experiences you laugh about over a drink with friends.

"On the run?" Bev asked as we turned off an asphalt road and bumped along a rutted track.

"Nothing to worry you." Then I added, "Just my brother Kane." My ego needed for her to know I wasn't a bum or lawbreaker.

"Like in Cain and Abel?"

"No, like in *Citizen Kane,*" I said, as I tried to see her snub-nosed profile in the darkening cab.

"We lived on a farm when Mom was alive, and she spent winters reading and watching old movies."

"That accounts for Kane. What about Nick?"

"It's Charlie, remember? Charles Dickens," I told her. "One of Mom's favorites."

But today, these years later, Bev's not behind me at the Eden. To see her I'll have to drive to the Haven. I clock the four miles, following the winding track up and down the lay of the land. I see the

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break in the barbed fence and the tracks through the cactus and sage leading off to the right.

The sign on the fence post is almost illegible. Someone has scratched an E between and above the H and the A. Heaven for the birds of prey. Bev is God.

"I'd do anything for my birds," she told me once.

I should have believed her.

I stop the car about half a mile from the Haven buildings. I get out, leave the road, and walk to the crest of the slope where I can look down on the long weathered barn that houses a supply room, the Haven's office, and the one-room apartment where I lived with a few flea-market discards for furniture. Bev's frame house sags away from the sun a couple hundred yards beyond.

It's more desolate than I remember. Even the two cottonwoods that shade the bird cages droop. "You're a fool," I tell myself. "Nothing from here can reach you. Go home to Jan! Run!"

I turn to rush to my car and the heat stuns me. In a blind second I stumble. My hand brushes a cholla as I fall. I pull the cactus spines from my hand with my teeth and suck the smarting wounds as I put the car into reverse.

I look back. A cloud of dust is coming over the hill behind me and almost hides a large square delivery truck. The narrow road is lined with cactus, and I can't turn out. I have to go on.

I drive into the graveled area between Bev's house and the bird enclosures that are attached to the far end of the barn. The place looks abandoned.

Bev's house needs a new roof. The wildflower garden in front is dead. Weeds have overgrown the fence.

But I see old Maggie, the red-tailed hawk, sitting on her perch in the first of the two rows of cages. She turns her head and shifts her tethered feet. Wrinkled skin shows through her breast feathers. She still plucks them out as if to deplore her condition.

Maggie is imprinted on people, as birds are when taken from their mothers too soon after hatching. Maggie doesn't know she's a hawk and can't hunt. All the birds at the Haven are either mal-imprinted or physically damaged, generally from gunshot.

The delivery driver is out of his truck and rushes three boxes toward the office. Frozen mice, probably, leftovers from research at a Denver lab.

I know I should get out of here. But I wait. Bev doesn't look my way as she signs for the delivery. Are those the same shoes or has she worn out another mismatched pair?

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Why does she neglect her appearance? Even when she takes the birds for money-raising environmental lectures or mall shows in larger towns, Bev looks thrown together.

I wonder again if the neglect has to do with the picture I saw on Bev's desk the one time I was in her house. It showed a blurred young man in a leather jacket and a small boy standing in front of a brick house.

Bev never mentioned her family. I knew nothing of her, just as she learned little of me in my five weeks at the Haven.

Bev beckons the driver into the office. Here's a chance to look around, and I can't resist.

A great horned owl blinks at me sleepily.

He's a new addition to the guest list since my time. The tiny saw-whet owl is gone. I'm not certain about the two Harris's hawks. They could be the same or different.

To me, the beady-eyed raptors are alien to any emotion. They don't beg with sorrowful looks or wag their tails with joy. I cleaned and mended their cages and tended the grounds. Without special training and passing a test given by the Federal Wildlife Division, I couldn't handle the birds. After two days, I hated the dismal place. Did I stay because I was needed or for some other reason I didn't want to investigate?

The bald eagle still occupies one cage. Bev did push-ups to keep her arms strong enough to raise the huge bird above her head on a gloved hand at her lectures.

I force myself to go on to the large enclosure on the far side where the birds that can, may fly. The cage is built of vertically placed wooden dowels rather than wire so the birds won't hurt themselves if they fly into it. The sun throws barred shadows across my path.

My pulse throbs in my head. I see the great golden eagle perched on a dead cottonwood limb at the far end of the cage, and my legs try to buckle. She probably has a wing span of six feet and a weight of twelve pounds.

My stomach lurches as I kick at the soil around the small wire door near the ground where, if need be, food and water can be slipped inside without entering the cage. I expect to uncover dark patches of old blood.

"The golden's not imprinted," Bev told me the day she brought the bird to the Haven.

A rancher had illegally caught and caged the eagle several months before. She had been rescued and flown to a nearby airport

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where Bev picked her up and brought her home in a large dog kennel.

"Don't let her see you any more than necessary," Bev said, breathless with exertion and excitement, as she set the kennel down and opened its door inside our large cage. "We won't feed her for two or three weeks. Then we'll free her and she'll be hungry enough to hunt on her own."

When Bev first explained to me about birds being imprinted on humans, she said, "People can be mal-imprinted, too."

I laughed. "How? On what?"

"On other people," she said half seriously. "On ideas, money. Then they forget how to be really human or their own true selves."

I knew this was fanciful chatter, because Bev was a scientist. Her diplomas on the office wall verified her degrees in animal behavior and environmental studies.

"Who are you imprinted on, Nick-Charles?" she asked.

"Everyone used to say I was like Mom. They said I was quiet and liked books better than people."

"That fits. And your brother?"

"Uncle Zeke," I answered quickly, realizing it was true. "He lived with us off and on."

Uncle Zeke was the one who addicted Kane to danger.

At the time, Bev and I were digging up the clogged pipe from her house to the septic tank. She swung a mean pick, and I couldn't help but ask, "Are you a mal-imprint, Bev?"

"Of course." She wiped gritty sweat from her face with a bare arm. "I was hatched a crow, but I fell out of the nest, and when I opened my eyes I saw a cholla."

I'm brought back to the present by the ache in my hand from my cactus wounds. I look toward the office. Bev and the delivery driver are still inside.

My mind slips back once more to the past, to the day Kane came.

I was backing out of the walkway between the two rows of small cages when behind me, my brother said, "Taken up chicken farming now?"

His voice was like a kick from a wired fence even though I was half expecting him. A couple of mornings before I woke remembering the card I'd given to Moses Romero to mail.

I took another step back, locked the gate, and dropped the keys into my pocket.

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We're supposed to have scenes from life flash by when we face death. I have the flashbacks now, six years later, as I scuff the dirt beside the golden's cage.

Mom, Dad, Grandma, and brawny Uncle Zeke are playing cards in the living room at the farm. I'm on the floor in a spot of late Sunday afternoon sun attempting to read a copy of *Two Years Before the Mast* that Uncle Zeke bought me for my ninth birthday.

Uncle Zeke has been there for a week after an absence of two years. He's telling about his adventures. "Escapades," Mom calls them. He's climbed mountains in Alaska, capsized in a sailboat off South Africa, gotten stinking drunk in Madagascar.

"And everywhere else," Mom says just as Grandma yells, "Gin!"

Then to me, Grandma says, "Charlie, fill up my ice-tea glass, please, and more ice and lots of sugar this time. I'm celebrating."

As I leave the room, Grandma's saying, "What would I do without a weekly game of gin? Die of boredom for sure."

I wait to hear Uncle Zeke reply, "See, Mama, I'm like you. Gambling, cockfights. That's my 'gin.' That's what keeps me feeling alive."

Dad doesn't say anything. His brother seems to take over our house when he's there.

"If you ever go outside the law, Zeke," Mom says in her quiet voice, "don't come here again."

A quiet voice, a quiet person.

Even when I got into mischief, she would look up from her book and say quietly, "That wasn't the right thing to do, Charlie. Give yourself a punishment."

If I said I'd not watch TV for a night, Mom would suggest two nights. If I said I'd clean the porch, she'd suggest I do the stairwell, too.

Always without anger, without raising her voice. "Make it fit the crime, Charlie."

Kane was older. He did as he pleased.

Forget it, I tell myself, but another scene flashes by.

Kane is sharpening the bowie knife Uncle Zeke gave him.

"I'm like him," Kane says. "I'd rather die in a hurricane at sea than die of boredom on this stupid farm." He jabs out with the knife in hard, quick movements. "I'm going to play 'gin,' too. You want to play, Charlie?"

I shake my head. Kane scares me.

"But I won't play on Sunday like Grandma. I'll play Wednesdays."

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Soon after that, a neighbor's haystack burns late on Wednesday night. Foster's horses get out and race around the community tearing up fences and injuring a young mare. Mrs. Colburn gets lost in a blizzard because detour signs have been put on the road she uses to drive home from work.

"Kane, quit it," I tell my brother.

"Quit what?" he asks with a grin.

"I'll tell."

"You do and you'll make Thursday's headlines," he warns.

Uncle Zeke comes again when I'm eleven. He's been in the Mideast. My cat has had kittens and I can't find them. I look in the empty grain room. Mom and Uncle Zeke are lying together on the old army blanket from her car. Mom sees me and stares with her mouth open and her hand at her throat.

For me, time becomes jumbled. After Mom dies we move. The city paper is too full of tragic stories to pinpoint Kane's games, but I know he has too much money. He's drinking. I don't like his friends.

"Chicken farmer," Kane taunted me.

"Not chickens," I said. "Predators. Kin of yours."

He must have left his car out on the road so he could sneak up on me unheard.

"You gave me a good hunt, Charlie."

He stood with his weight on one sandaled foot and his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "And I thought you didn't want to play."

"Even I can get bored." I tried to keep the tone light. I had realized it was Wednesday.

I had to get Kane away from the Haven. Bev had gone off for a mall show but could be back anytime.

"So you found me. Game's over. I'll get my things and we can get out of this hole."

"I don't like to see living things in cages," Kane said, nodding toward the cages. "Let them out."

"Leave the birds alone, Kane. Come on. Let's go!"

"Give me the keys."

I pulled the keys from my pocket and tossed them up and away as Kane saw my intention and rushed me. As I went down, they lit on the top of the golden's cage, hung a moment, and then fell.

Kane saw the small hinged feeding door and kicked it out, dropped to the ground, and stretched his arm into the cage toward the keys.

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A warning rose to my throat as the eagle shifted her feet. Her wings began to raise.

Bev was wrong! The golden was imprinted. She had no fear of Kane.

The bird took a brief second to drop to Kane's arm and lock her two-and-a-half-inch hind talon and three opposing claws into his flesh.

"Kill it! Kill it!" Kane screamed.

I couldn't move. The real world retreated as I watched the hungry bird's hooked beak tear out its first bite.

Kane squeezed his other arm through the small opening and tried to wrench the bird from his arm. In an instant, it too was pinned.

How long until he bleeds to death? I wondered. How long until he dies of trauma?

I quit hearing Kane's screams. I didn't hear Bev's truck.

"Who's the crazy fool who parked on the road?" she yelled at me.

Then Bev heard and saw Kane. As she passed me on the run, I heard her shout, "Why didn't you get the gun?" She was back in a moment with the revolver she kept in the office desk.

The two explosions close to my ear jarred me back into reality.

Kane's screams stopped. The golden spread her wings and lifted up to her perch.

"Who is he?" Bev demanded of me.

"I don't know." I refused to be my brother's keeper.

"If anyone hears about this I'll lose the birds," Bev yelled at me. "Get his keys and drive his car into the arroyo out by the lakes."

She ran off to the supply room as I searched Kane's pockets. I took the keys, his wallet, a couple of receipts, everything that could identify him.

Bev came out of the barn with a shovel as I dashed from my room with my pack.

She called something I didn't hear.

I ran and stumbled all the way to Kane's car and then drove without stopping, except for hamburgers and gas, until I neared Chicago. Before going back to the store and my evening classes, I took a few days to strip Kane's car. The engine is in my old white Chev.

Customers soon quit asking when Kane would be home from his latest adventure.

The present intrudes on my thoughts. Strange, I think, that all the traces of blood are gone. I've thought of them as always being there in the dirt I'm scuffing with my toe.

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Bev and the driver are walking to his truck.

"May I help you with something?" she calls as they near me.

I see she's cradling her right arm in her left hand.

"Just a bit of arthritis," she always used to say.

"It's Charlie. Remember?"

"Sure. Glad to see you."

Bev turns to the driver. "Sam, this is Charlie from Utah." Bev looks back at me. "It is Utah, isn't it? You came with a group that wanted to start a refuge of your own."

I take a step backward. Bev has accumulated an odor of old dirt and sweat.

"We never did get a program started," I say.

The driver looks at his watch and then at me. "Have a good trip," he says. "See you next time, Bev."

"I'll move along, too," I say. "I need another hundred miles behind me today."

I walk toward my car. Bev's voice stops me.

"I can't do it alone, Nick. I'm going to lose my birds."

I hold the car door handle for support.

"I need a man to do mean, dirty work." She waits. "You can save us both," she finally adds.

I look at the track of road leading away from the Haven to Jan. I open the car door to get in. I can still get away.

Bev has followed me to the car and holds something in her outstretched fist.

I accept it and stare down at Kane's class ring with the school name around a large red stone and his name engraved inside.

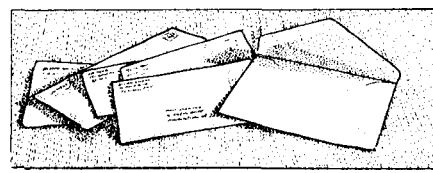
My stomach cramps and I almost double over. The heat shimmers everywhere. I can't see beyond the barn and the house. The road has disappeared.

I hear the quiet voice Mom used before she hanged herself, "Make the punishment fit the crime, Charlie."

I release a deep sigh and accept my sentence.

"Same bunk?" I ask.

Bev nods. "You'll have to clean out the mice."



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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

Take everyday characters in commonplace situations, add a slightly bitter or somber twist, and a surprise for the ending, and you have a story by Donald Olson. The New York state author writes about the manners of our time, and the sinister situations to which they can lead. . .

DEAD RIGHT

by DONALD OLSON

She'd tried pills and she'd tried painting; she'd tried aerobics and she'd tried gardening; she'd tried everything touted by all the talk-show know-it-alls for women left high and dry, or more accurately low and tear-drenched, in the wake of marriages expected to last forever. For Rhoda nothing worked. Her restlessness grew as unbearable as an itch beneath the skin. With no clear direction to her life she felt herself sliding into a state of chronic depression, with nothing and no one to rescue her.

To add to her misery, the faithless Elwood, with a younger wife to spoil and a business in the dumps, had been fishing for a reduction in alimony payments.

At this low point her friend Carol Ann had cajoled Rhoda into trying out for a part in the new Little Theater production, a gothic melodrama called *Dark Destiny*. "Rhoda, honey, it's just the sort of emotional outlet you need, and it'll be fun, you'll see. It's a juicy part and Ruby Tresch is the only other gal trying out for it."

Well, why not? Rhoda had never done any acting, but she was desperate enough to risk making a fool of herself. The role was that of a slovenly psychopathic housekeeper who falls in love with her employer and murders his wife. The tryouts were more agonizing

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than Rhoda had feared, yet at the same time exhilarating. Quite suddenly she found herself wildly enthusiastic. She felt that she had given a more than competent reading of the part even though she was aware that physically she did not correspond to the author's description of the character. Rhoda was more on the petite side, with doll-baby features just beginning to reveal signs of ageing around the eyes and mouth. Her demeanor betrayed no hint of an underlying neurotic tension except when she laughed, an abrupt peacock screech of laughter which always provoked a startled reaction from those around her.

Ruby Tresch had more experience and a face and figure more suited to the part, but Carol Ann assured Rhoda that with proper makeup and padding and wig she could easily project the image the director wanted.

Unfortunately, he disagreed. Three days after the tryout, during which Rhoda had assiduously studied the script Carol Ann had left with her, the director phoned to say he was sorry but he wouldn't be able to use her. Yes, her reading was entirely adequate, but she simply didn't "fill the bill." When Rhoda protested, feeling herself suddenly awash in that spiritual drift from which she'd thought herself about to be rescued, the director suggested she might perhaps work backstage and also understudy Ruby Tresch. Rhoda curtly refused.

While the shrinks might have offered a more clinically precise description of Rhoda's state of mind following this rebuff, others, had they been aware of it, might simply have said that "something snapped." Rhoda became obsessed with a furious determination not to be denied this possibly final chance to stop the slide. For the next two weeks she spent hours memorizing the housekeeper's lines. At a thrift store she bought the appropriate garments and a gray rat's nest of a wig. With padding and makeup and thick-lensed glasses she transformed herself into the image of the blowzy housekeeper. It was all great fun and more invigorating to her depleted ego than a string of the usual afternoon gin fizzes.

Four days before the play was to open, Rhoda culled the pharmaceutical contents of her medicine cabinet, well-stocked from the period when pills had seemed the only answer. Carol Ann had once mentioned Ruby's fondness for a certain exotic liqueur. With a bottle of this liqueur, lethally laced with barbiturates, Rhoda, one dark and rainy afternoon, paid a visit to Ruby Tresch. Expounding on the demands of the role she'd undertaken to play, Ruby hugged the

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bottle to her breast. "Just what I need," she declared, "to settle my nerves."

"Mrs. Messinger?"

"Speaking."

"Tom Gill. We met at the tryouts for *Dark Destiny*. I'm directing, remember?"

Rhoda replied with a touch of frost. "Indeed I do."

"I suppose you've heard about poor Ruby."

"Dreadful, yes. She seemed anything but the suicidal type. Not that I knew her that well, but I have friends who did."

"Look, I know it's short notice, but Carol Ann was telling me how much you really wanted to play the part. Said you'd even memorized the lines."

Rhoda uttered that abrupt screech of laughter. "Oh, just for fun. I thought it might be good practice in case I ever tried out for another play."

"Well, my dear, you could be a godsend if you'd agree to step into the role."

Rhoda permitted herself a lengthy pause. "You said I didn't fill the bill."

A slight, ingratiating chuckle. "What I should have said was that you're far too attractive."

"That's sweet of you, Mr. Gill, but you did rather wound my poor little ego. Just to prove to myself that I *could* look the part I've been—well, why don't I pop in to see you, you'll understand what I mean. Will you be at the theater tomorrow afternoon?"

"You mean you *would* be willing to save our bacon?"

"One-thirty all right?"

"You're a doll. I'm ever so grateful. Look forward to seeing you."

For once Rhoda found herself able to respond to Elwood's phone entreaty in a tone of bland, amiable indifference.

"Yes, Elwood, I know your lawyer talked to my lawyer, and I know what you were told."

"Rhoda, be a sport. I'm really in a godawful bind. It's only temporary, but right now those alimony payments are killing me. The situation's critical. You can well afford to be a little generous. God knows I was."

"You had no choice. You wanted *her* and you were more than willing to pay the price. Fine. Dandy. You got what you wanted, so stop boo-hooing."

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"Listen, I'll make it up to you—"

"You couldn't, not in a million-trillion years. Sorry, but I'll not be a *sport*. I've no intention of sacrificing my comfort to get you out of any *bind*. Bye-bye, love."

With an air of gleeful satisfaction Rhoda regarded the bizarre image in her mirror; an image of frowzy negligence—a bulky figure clad in a faded dress and cardigan, mottled cheeks plump as a pigeon's, teeth stained, eyes huge behind magnifying lenses, a battered straw hat atop witchy gray hair shaggy as a sheepdog's. Oh, yes, anyone would agree, she fit the image and then some.

The thought of Ruby Tresch crossed her mind, leaving not a shadow of remorse. Remembering how dangerously close she had come to mixing herself a lethal cocktail when she was in the most acute stage of post-divorce despair, Rhoda struck a pose reminiscent of Bette Davis in one of her many roles. "Sorry," she quipped, "but it was either me or you, *dahling*."

She would never forget the look of amazement on Tom Gill's face.

"Rhoda? Is it really *you?"*

"No, thank God. But do I fit the image?"

"Marvelous. Bloody marvelous. One could say you've been hiding your bushel under a light."

"Overdone it, have I?"

"Not at all. It's perfect. I asked Carter Lyman to come in. Let's see how you play it together."

The stage. Why had she never before considered the stage? The classic escape from one's own demons. She wasn't too old for a fresh start. Little Theater might be only the first step toward a career, an ambition she might have realized years ago but for Elwood's male obstructiveness. Wickedly, Rhoda decided to send opening night tickets to Elwood and *her*. They might not come, but she'd have the pleasure of making the gesture.

Rhoda wished Carol Ann weren't out of town for the weekend. What fun to appear on her doorstep rigged out like Boxcar Molly. Aglow with the pride of her achievement, Rhoda strode like the Bag Lady Queen of Broadway to the nearest cab stand and rode home to celebrate with a *single* gin fizz.

There she sat dreaming at her dressing table, somehow loath to discard the shabby trappings of make-believe, feeling oddly at peace in the persona of the psychopathic housekeeper, Edwina Spode.

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The phone rang. Rousing herself to answer it, she found no one on the line. "Hello, hello, hello," she bellowed merrily; with a click the caller hung up. Disappointed, Rhoda tried to think of someone to call to relate the exciting news of her imminent theatrical debut, but who was there to call? She had no real friends left but Carol Ann.

Her diary! She could at least record the news in that little blue book in which there'd been nothing worth writing for the past several months. Taking it from the bedside stand, she happily inscribed the barest details of her triumph; there was room for no more. Then, underlining the words, she added: *the slide has stopped!*

Sipping her gin fizz, she relapsed once more into daydreams for perhaps another half-hour, and then, with a contented sigh, reached up to remove the damaged relic of a black straw hat trimmed with droopy red plastic cherries.

She paused, distracted by what might have been a sound from downstairs. She crossed to the door and listened without opening it. Hearing nothing, she removed the hat and was about to lift off the ratty wig when the bedroom door burst open behind her.

Before she could cry out, she was seized and pinned against the chest of a man wearing a plastic Halloween mask, a glimpse of which tore the scream from Rhoda's lips before she was jerked around to face the door.

A second figure, huskier and wearing a similar mask, held a gun in his hand. "She ain't the Messinger broad," he yelped. "Who the hell are you, sister?"

The first coherent thought, irrational but compelling, to cross Rhoda's mind was that this had something to do with what she'd done to Ruby Tresch, but almost instantly she realized this was nonsense. If she'd been linked to Ruby's death the police would have come for her, not two masked thugs. Despite her panic, a self-protective instinct sharpened her wits.

"Me? I—I'm Edwina Spode. The cleaning lady."

"So where's Mrs. Messinger?"

"Out. She's out. Me, I was just leaving."

"Like hell you are. When'll she be back?"

"I don't know."

The skinny one nudged his companion. "You said she answered the phone."

"Someone answered the phone, dummy. I thought it was her. Who said anything about a cleaning woman?"

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"Please," said Rhoda. "Take what you want and go. I know where she keeps her jewels. And I know there's some money in a safe downstairs. Behind the picture over the sideboard."

Thank God she'd had the presence of mind to remove her ring and tuck it in her bag before donning her costume. Edwina Spode would not have flaunted an heirloom diamond worth more than the contents of the house.

"All in good time," said the husky one. "Tie her up. Dump her on the bed."

In seconds Rhoda was tightly bound, hand and foot, and helpless on the bed, her eyes fixed on the man who seemed to be in charge.

"So now what?" the other one asked.

"We wait." He looked at Rhoda. "There any booze in the house?"

"Downstairs. Cabinet in the den." Rhoda hoped both of them would leave the room. She couldn't think in their presence, could not even breathe normally. Every horror story she'd read, every TV drama she'd ever seen about women at the mercy of housebreakers filled her mind.

She turned her head toward the nightstand as they both went out. The phone was within easy reach if only her hands were free. She rolled to the edge of the bed. If only . . .

But already they were coming back; quickly she resumed the position in which they'd left her. She heard one of them go into the bathroom while the big one stood in the doorway watching her.

"No offense, sweetie, but you're a lousy cleaning lady. You said you were just leaving? What'd you do, forget to clean up the mess in the kitchen?"

Rhoda didn't like the way he was watching her, as if his eyes behind that leering funny-face mask were penetrating her own disguise.

"I was going next door to borrow some Drano. Can't you untie me, let me get on with the cleaning up?"

"Relax. You'll have a lot more than that to clean up."

Scenes of carnage in all those films flashed through her mind. Blood on the walls. But he couldn't mean that. He couldn't.

The other one entered the room. "Listen, man, maybe you better get on the blower."

"No. We wait."

"But she ain't here, dammit."

"She will be. Keep your pants on."

The words brought a fresh wave of terror. Rhoda shut her eyes

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and tried to think. If it was not robbery, if it was Rhoda Messinger herself they wanted, how long would they wait before realizing she wasn't coming home? Not indefinitely, surely. Not all evening. Not all night. And what would they do with *her* when they realized something was wrong, that Rhoda Messinger wasn't *coming* home? In the meantime there was no one, she knew, to be concerned about her, no one likely to phone the house, become alarmed. Only Carol Ann might have called and she was gone for the weekend.

"Coolin' our heels like this," muttered the skinny one, "it makes me jumpy. I hate waitin'."

"Then get busy. Start rippin' the place up."

As if delighted with this order, his companion began pulling out drawers, rifling their contents and strewing them on the floor, yanking clothes from the closet. Rhoda's panic rose once more at the sight of this vandalism. Only when both men went back downstairs did she breathe naturally. From below came the sound of china being smashed, furniture overturned, glass shattering.

Plainly, thought Rhoda, these were not teenage vandals, and if robbery was not their intent, why hadn't they simply waited calmly for their victim to return? It must be Rhoda Messinger they were after or they wouldn't have made that phone call to determine that she *was* at home, not to make sure the house was empty.

Kidnapping? Rhoda knew that even rank amateurs wouldn't venture a kidnapping without first having done their homework. Didn't they know Elwood had dumped her? If they kidnapped anyone it would be Elwood's present wife, and where would Elwood get the money to ransom *her?*

Rhoda still felt no remorse about Ruby Tresch, only a sense of bitter irony, for in a way Ruby had saved her from God knew what terrible indignities. If Ruby hadn't died, the intruders wouldn't have been deceived by "Edwina Spode." It was clear from the moment they'd burst in that they knew what Rhoda Messinger looked like.

Hearing them in the kitchen, Rhoda moved to the edge of the bed facing the nightstand. Thankful that they'd bound her hands in front and not behind her back, she fumbled for the phone and pulled it onto the bed. Even with her wrists bound she could dial 911, but of course it was pointless; they'd had the forethought to take the downstairs phone off the hook. Rhoda thought of her diary with its tiny attached gold pen, and with no clear idea what good it might do snatched it from the drawer. Scrawling a plea for help and hiding it under the pillow made sense only if there was a possibility of she

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herself being abducted. But she had to do *something*.

The pen was in her hand when she heard one of them coming back upstairs.

Clumsily she managed to replace the phone on its cradle and slipped the diary down inside the bodice of her dress. The toilet flushed. Footsteps tramped down the stairs. Dully, Rhoda looked toward the window, knowing that even if she could reach it, no one could see her if she looked out or hear her cries for help. There was only the garden below, the lawn, the picket fence, and a belt of trees screening the house from the road.

Unable to relax, she lay stiffly on the bed, listening for sounds from below, but now there was silence, a silence she prayed would continue until she dared assume they'd gone away and it would be safe somehow to make her way down the stairs to the phone. As the moments passed hope mounted until she was about to swing herself off the bed, but then she heard them returning.

The skinny one spoke in a surly tone. "Okay, sister, how come she ain't back yet?"

Suddenly, an inspiration. "What time is it?" Rhoda asked.

"What the hell do you care, you ain't goin' no place."

"Tell me, please."

"Three-thirty. So what?"

"It's her bridge day. Mrs. Messinger was meeting friends for lunch, then coming back here for bridge. That's why she wanted me today. To clean the house, prepare refreshments. She said they'd be here by four-thirty."

"They?"

"The four of them."

The big man made a threatening gesture. "Why the hell didn't you say that?"

"I was scared."

"Dammit, I say we pack it in," said Skinny. "She was supposed to be here, *alone*. In and out, that's how we planned it."

His companion moved to the door. "I better call the man."

They both went downstairs.

Rhoda waited another couple of minutes before once again turning to the phone, again easing it onto the bed beside her ear, holding her breath as she listened.

". . . we're not the ones who bungled it, dammit. You didn't say nothin' about no cleanin' lady."

"I didn't know she had a cleaning lady."

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At the sound of that voice Rhoda clamped her lips tight shut to stifle a gasp.

Elwood?

"Yeah, well she does. The old bat says your ex-wife's comin' home at four-thirty with three other bridge partners. What the hell we supposed to do, man? The deal wasn't for no goddam massacre."

"You cleaned out the safe?"

"Yeah, and we trashed the place good."

Rhoda could picture Elwood's face, could hear the tension in his voice. "That'll shake her up. The other will have to wait."

"Job's still on then?"

"What do you think? I've paid half your fee, haven't I? Look, next time make it look like an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"That's up to you. Just don't bungle it."

"Got it, man. We're outa here. But what do we do about the old broad?"

"She can't identify you, can she?"

"We ain't that dumb."

A long pause, then: "There's a walk-in storage locker in the laundry room. Stick her in there. She'll be okay till Rhoda gets home. Make her think you were waiting to snatch the ring."

Panic subsided into a state of emotional numbness as Rhoda carefully replaced the phone and buried her face in the pillow. Indignities? My God, she owed her *life* to Ruby Tresch.

She tried to protest as they came back upstairs, released her from her bonds, and all but dragged her down to the laundry room off the kitchen.

"You put all the goodies in the van?" the big man asked.

"Yeah, for what they're worth. That rock she always wears would have fetched a real bundle. What a foul-up."

Rhoda struggled as they attempted to force her into the storage locker.

"Relax, sweetie," said the big man. "You won't run out of air before your boss-lady comes home."

The metal locker was as big as a small closet, but as the door slammed shut and the lock turned Rhoda felt as if it were no bigger than a coffin.

"Then you're canceling the play?" asked Carol Ann, meeting Tom Gill at the funeral.

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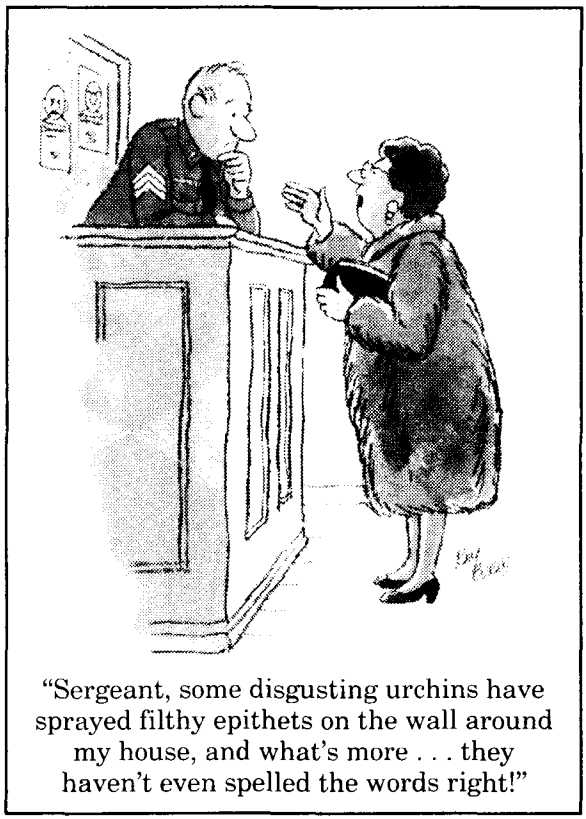
"In view of the double tragedy we had no choice. First Ruby and then Rhoda."

"I still can't believe it, Elwood hiring someone to kill his wife."

"No one would have known," said Gill, "if they hadn't found that diary in the locker. Rhoda managed to scrawl a few words before she died."

"Poor Rhoda. She was so excited about the play. It was just what she needed to bring her out of herself."

"I know. A tragic loss. Nobody will ever know how good she would have been." Then, before realizing his appalling choice of words: "She was dead right for the part, poor dear."



"Sergeant, some disgusting urchins have sprayed filthy epithets on the wall around my house, and what's more . . . they haven't even spelled the words right!"

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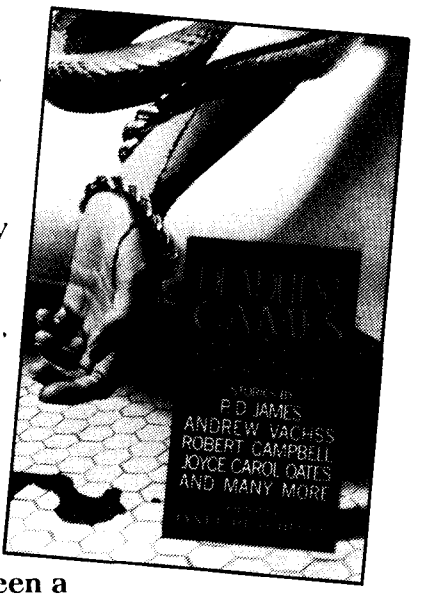

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a *NEW* short story by

BILL PRONZINI

Bill Pronzini was born in Petaluma, California, near where he resides today, but he spent four years in Europe and has traveled extensively elsewhere. Before becoming a full-time writer of fiction, his jobs varied from sportswriter to plumbing supply salesman, which is perhaps why he is able to write about so many walks of life . . .

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

by BILL PRONZINI

He came tumbling out of the sea, dark and misshapen, like a being that was not human. A creature from the depths; or a jumbee, the evil spirit of West Indian superstition. Fanciful thoughts, and Shea was not a fanciful woman. But on this strange, wild night nothing seemed real or explicable.

At first, with the moon hidden behind the running scud of clouds, she'd seen him as a blob of flotsam on a breaking wave. The squall earlier had left the sea rough and the swells out toward the reef were high, their crests stripped of spume by the wind. The angry surf threw him onto the strip of beach, dragged him back again; another wave flung him up a little farther. The moon reappeared then, bathing sea and beach and rocks in the kind of frost-white shine you found only in the Caribbean. Not flotsam—something alive. She saw his arms extend, splayed fingers dig into the sand to hold himself against the backward pull of the sea. Saw him raise a smallish head above a massive, deformed torso, then squirm weakly toward the nearest jut of rock. Another wave shoved him the last few feet. He clung to the rock, lying motionless with the surf foaming around him.

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Out of the depths, she thought.

The irony made her shiver, draw the collar of her coat more tightly around her neck. She lifted her gaze again to the rocky peninsula farther south. Windflaw Point, where the undertow off its tiny beach was the most treacherous on the island. It had taken her almost an hour to marshal her courage to the point where she was ready—almost ready—to walk out there and into the ocean. *Into* the depths. Now . . .

Massive clouds sealed off the moon again. In the heavy darkness Shea could just make him out, still lying motionless on the fine coral sand. Unconscious? Dead? I ought to go down there, she thought. But she could not seem to lift herself out of the chair.

After several minutes he moved again: dark shape rising to hands and knees, then trying to stand. Three tries before he was able to keep his legs from collapsing under him. He stood swaying, as if gathering strength; finally staggered onto the path that led up through rocks and sea grape. Toward the house. Toward her.

On another night she would have felt any number of emotions by this time: surprise, bewilderment, curiosity, concern. But not on this night. There was a numbness in her mind, like the numbness in her body from the cold wind. It was as if she were dreaming, sitting there on the open terrace—as if she'd fallen asleep hours ago, before the clouds began to pile up at sunset and the sky turned the color of a blood bruise.

A new storm was making up. Hammering northern this time, from the look of the sky. The wind had shifted, coming out of the northeast now; the clouds were bloated and simmering in that direction and the air had a charged quality. Unless the wind shifted again soon, the rest of the night would be even wilder.

Briefly the clouds released the moon. In its white glare she saw him plodding closer, limping, almost dragging his left leg. A man, of course—just a man. And not deformed: what had made him seem that way was the life jacket fastened around his upper body. She remembered the lights of a freighter or tanker she had seen passing on the horizon just after nightfall, ahead of the squall. Had he gone overboard from that somehow?

He had reached the garden, was making his way past the flamboyant trees and the thick clusters of frangipani. Heading toward the garden door and the kitchen: she'd left the lights on in there and the jalousies open. It was the lights that had drawn him here, like a beacon that could be seen a long distance out to sea.

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A good thing she'd left them on or not? She didn't want him here, a cast-up stranger, hurt and needing attention—not on this night, not when she'd been so close to making the walk to Windflaw Point. But neither could she refuse him access or help. John would have, if he'd been drunk and in the wrong mood. Not her. It was not in her nature to be cruel to anyone, except perhaps herself.

Abruptly Shea pushed herself out of the chair. He hadn't seen her sitting in the restless shadows, and he didn't see her now as she moved back across the terrace to the sliding glass doors to her bedroom. Or at least if he did see her, he didn't stop or call out to her. She hurried through the darkened bedroom, down the hall, and into the kitchen. She was halfway to the garden door when he began pounding on it.

She unlocked and opened the door without hesitation. He was propped against the stucco wall, arms hanging and body slumped with exhaustion. Big and youngish, that was her first impression. She couldn't see his face clearly.

"Need some help," he said in a thick, strained voice. "Been in the water . . . washed up on your beach. . . ."

"I know, I saw you from the terrace. Come inside."

"Better get a towel first. Coral ripped a gash in my foot . . . blood all over your floor."

"All right. I'll have to close the door. The wind. . . ."

"Go ahead."

She shut the door and went to fetch a towel, a blanket, and the first-aid kit. On the way back to the kitchen she turned the heat up several degrees. When she opened up to him again she saw that he'd shed the life jacket. His clothing was minimal: plaid wool shirt, denim trousers, canvas shoes, all nicked and torn by coral. Around his waist was a pouch-type waterproof belt, like a workman's utility belt. One of the pouches bulged slightly.

She gave him the towel, and when he had it wrapped around his left foot he hobbled inside. She took his arm, let him lean on her as she guided him to the kitchen table. His flesh was cold, sea-puckered; the touch of it made her feel a tremor of revulsion. It was like touching the skin of a dead man.

When he sank heavily onto one of the chairs, she dragged another chair over and lifted his injured leg onto it. He stripped off what was left of his shirt, swaddled himself in the blanket. His teeth were chattering.

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The coffeemaker drew her; she poured two of the big mugs full. There was always hot coffee ready and waiting, no matter what the hour—she made sure of that. She drank too much coffee, much too much, but it was better than drinking what John usually drank. If she—

"You mind sweetening that?"

She half-turned. "Sugar?"

"Liquor. Rum, if you have it?"

"Jamaican rum." That was what John drank.

"Best there is. Fine."

She took down an open bottle, carried it and the mugs to the table, and watched while he spiked the coffee, drank, then poured more rum and drank again. Color came back into his stubbled cheeks. He used part of the blanket to rough-dry his hair.

He was a little older than she, early thirties, and in good physical condition: broad chest and shoulders, muscle-knotted arms. Sandy hair cropped short, thick sandy brows, a long-chinned face burned dark from exposure to the sun. The face was all right, might have been attractive except for the eyes. They were a bright off-blue color, shielded by lids that seemed perpetually lowered like flags at half-mast, and they didn't blink much. When the eyes lifted to meet and hold hers something in them made her look away.

"I'll see what I can do for your foot."

"Thanks. Hurts like hell."

The towel was already soaking through. Shea unwrapped it carefully, revealing a deep gash across the instep just above the tongue of his shoe. She got the shoe and sock off. More blood welled out of the cut.

"It doesn't look good. You may need a doctor—"

"No," he said, "no doctor."

"It'll take stitches to close properly."

"Just clean and bandage it, okay?"

She spilled iodine onto a gauze pad, swabbed at the gash as gently as she could. The sharp sting made him suck in his breath, but he didn't flinch or utter another sound. She laid a second piece of iodined gauze over the wound and began to wind tape tightly around his foot to hold the skin flaps together.

He said, "My name's Tanner. Harry Tanner."

"Shea Clifford."

"Shea. That short for something?"

"It's a family name."

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"Pretty."

"Thank you."

"So are you," he said. "Real pretty with your hair all windblown like that."

She glanced up at him. He was smiling at her. Not a leer, just a weary smile, but it wasn't a good kind of smile. It had a predatory look, like the teeth-baring stretch of a wolf's jowls.

"No offense," he said.

"None taken." She lowered her gaze, watched her hands wind and tear tape. Her mind still felt numb. "What happened to you? Why were you in the water?"

"That damn squall a few hours ago. Came up so fast I didn't have time to get my genoa down. Wave as big as a house knocked poor little *Wanderer* into a full broach. I got thrown clear when she went over or I'd have sunk with her."

"Were you sailing alone?"

"All alone."

"Single-hander? Or just on a weekend lark?"

"Single-hander. You know boats, I see."

"Yes. Fairly well."

"Well, I'm a sea tramp," Tanner said. "Ten years of island-hopping and this is the first time I ever got caught unprepared."

"It happens. What kind of craft was *Wanderer?*"

"Bugeye ketch. Thirty-nine feet."

"Shame to lose a boat like that."

He shrugged. "She was insured."

"How far out were you?"

"Five or six miles. Hell of a long swim in a choppy sea."

"You're lucky the squall passed as quickly as it did."

"Lucky I was wearing my life jacket, too," Tanner said. "And lucky you stay up late with your lights on. If it weren't for the lights I probably wouldn't have made shore at all."

Shea nodded. She tore off the last piece of tape and then began putting the first-aid supplies away in the kit.

Tanner said, "I didn't see any other lights. This house the only one out here?"

"The only one on this side of the bay, yes."

"No close neighbors?"

"Three houses on the east shore, not far away."

"You live here alone?"

"With my husband."

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"But he's not here now."

"Not now. He'll be home soon."

"That so? Where is he?"

"In Merrywing, the town on the far side of the island. He went out to dinner with friends."

"While you stayed home."

"I wasn't feeling well earlier."

"Merrywing. Salt Cay?"

"That's right."

"British-owned, isn't it?"

"Yes. You've never been here before?"

"Not my kind of place. Too small, too quiet, too rich. I prefer the livelier islands—St. Thomas, Nassau, Jamaica."

"St. Thomas isn't far from here," Shea said. "Is that where you were heading?"

"More or less. This husband of yours—how big is he?"

". . . Big?"

"Big enough so his clothes would fit me?"

"Oh," she said, "yes. About your size."

"Think he'd mind if you let me have a pair of his pants and a shirt and some underwear? Wet things of mine are giving me a chill."

"No, of course not. I'll get them from his room."

She went to John's bedroom. The smells of his cologne and pipe tobacco were strong in there; they made her faintly nauseous. In haste she dragged a pair of white linen trousers and a pullover off hangers in his closet, turned toward the dresser as she came out. And stopped in midstride.

Tanner stood in the open doorway, leaning against the jamb, his half-lidded eyes fixed on her.

"*His* room," he said. "Right."

"Why did you follow me?"

"Felt like it. So you don't sleep with him."

"Why should that concern you?"

"I'm naturally curious. How come? I mean, how come you and your husband don't share a bed?"

"Our sleeping arrangements are none of your business."

"Probably not. Your idea or his?"

"What?"

"Separate bedrooms. Your idea or his?"

"Mine, if you must know."

"Maybe he snores, huh?"

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She didn't say anything.

"How long since you kicked him out of your bed?"

"I didn't kick him out. It wasn't like that."

"Sure it was. I can see it in your face."

"My private affairs—"

"—are none of my business. I know. But I also know the signs of a bad marriage when I see them. A bad marriage and an unhappy woman. Can't tell me you're not unhappy."

"All right," she said.

"So why don't you divorce him? Money?"

"Money has nothing to do with it."

"Money has something to do with everything."

"It isn't money."

"He have something on you?"

"No."

"Then why not just dump him?"

You're not going to divorce me, Shea. Not you, not like the others. I'll see you dead first. I mean it, Shea. You're mine and you'll stay mine until I decide I don't want you anymore. . . .

She said flatly, "I'm not going to talk about my marriage to you. I don't know you."

"We can fix that. I'm an easy guy to know."

She moved ahead to the dresser, found underwear and socks, put them on the bed with the trousers and pullover. "You can change in here," she said, and started for the doorway.

Tanner didn't move.

"I said—"

"I heard you, Shea."

"Mrs. Clifford."

"Clifford," he said. Then he smiled, the same wolfish lip-stretch he'd shown her in the kitchen. "Sure—Clifford. Your husband's name wouldn't be John, would it? John Clifford?"

She was silent.

"I'll bet it is. John Clifford, Clifford Yacht Designs. One of the best marine architects in Miami. Fancy motor sailers and racing yawls."

She still said nothing.

"House in Miami Beach, another on Salt Cay—this house. And you're his latest wife. Which is it, number three or number four?"

Between her teeth she said, "Three."

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"He must be what, fifty now? And worth millions. Don't tell me money's not why you married him."

"I won't tell you anything."

But his wealth wasn't why she'd married him. He had been kind and attentive to her at first. And she'd been lonely after the bitter breakup with Neal. John had opened up a whole new, exciting world to her: travel to exotic places, sailing, the company of interesting and famous people. She hadn't loved him, but she had been fond of him; and she'd convinced herself she would learn to love him in time. Instead, when he revealed his dark side to her, she had learned to hate him.

Tanner said, "Didn't one of his other wives divorce him for knocking her around when he was drunk? Seems I remember reading something like that in the Miami papers a few years back. That why you're unhappy, Shea? He knock *you* around when he's drinking?"

Without answering, Shea pushed past him into the hallway. He didn't try to stop her. In the kitchen again she poured yet another cup of coffee and sat down with it. Even with her coat on and the furnace turned up, she was still cold. The heat from the mug failed to warm her hands.

She knew she ought to be afraid of Harry Tanner. But all she felt inside was a deep weariness. An image of Windflaw Point, the tiny beach with its treacherous undertow, flashed across the screen of her mind—and was gone again just as swiftly. Her courage, or maybe her cowardice, was gone too. She was no longer capable of walking out to the point, letting the sea have her. Not tonight and probably not ever again.

She sat listening to the wind clamor outside. It moaned in the twisted branches of the banyan tree; scraped palm fronds against the roof tiles. Through the open window jalousies she could smell ozone mixed with the sweet fragrances of white ginger blooms. The new storm would be here soon in all its fury.

The wind kept her from hearing Tanner reenter the kitchen. She sensed his presence, looked up, and saw him standing there with his eyes on her like probes. He'd put on all of John's clothing and found a pair of Reeboks for his feet. In his left hand he held the waterproof belt that had been strapped around his waist.

"Shirt's a little snug," he said, "but a pretty good fit otherwise. Your husband's got nice taste."

Shea didn't answer.

"In clothing, in houses, and in women."

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She sipped her coffee, not looking at him.

Tanner limped around the table and sat down across from her. When he laid the belt next to the bottle of rum, the pouch that bulged made a thunking sound. "Boats too," he said. "I'll bet he keeps his best designs for himself; he's the kind that would. Am I right, Shea?"

"Yes."

"How many boats does he own?"

"Two."

"One's bound to be big. Oceangoing yacht?"

"Seventy-foot custom schooner."

"What's her name?"

"Moneybags."

Tanner laughed. "Some sense of humor."

"If you say so."

"Where does he keep her? Here or Miami?"

"Miami."

"She there now?"

"Yes."

"And the other boat? That one berthed here?"

"The harbor at Merrywing."

"What kind is she?"

"A sloop," Shea said. *"Carib Princess."*

"How big?"

"Thirty-two feet."

"She been back and forth across the Stream?"

"Several times, in good weather."

"With you at the helm?"

"No."

"You ever take her out by yourself?"

"No. He wouldn't allow it."

"But you can handle her, right? You said you know boats. You can pilot that little sloop without any trouble?"

"Why do you want to know that? Why are you asking so many questions about John's boats?"

"John's boats, John's houses, John's third wife." Tanner laughed again, just a bark this time. The wolfish smile pulled his mouth out of shape. "Are you afraid of me, Shea?"

"No."

"Not even a little?"

"Why? Should I be?"

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"What do you think?"

"I'm not afraid of you," she said.

"Then how come you lied to me?"

"Lied? About what?"

"Your husband. Old John Clifford."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You said he'd be home soon. But he won't be. He's not in town with friends, he's not even on the island."

She stared silently at the steam rising from her cup. Her fingers felt cramped, as if she might be losing circulation in them.

"Well, Shea? That's the truth, isn't it."

"Yes. That's the truth."

"Where is he? Miami?"

She nodded.

"Went there on business and left you all by your lonesome."

"It isn't the first time."

"Might be the last, though." Tanner reached for the rum bottle, poured some of the dark liquid into his mug, drank, and then smacked his lips. "You want a shot of this?"

"No."

"Loosen you up a little."

"I don't need loosening up."

"You might after I tell you the truth about Harry Tanner."

"Does that mean you lied to me too?"

"I'm afraid so. But you 'fessed up and now it's my turn."

In the blackness outside the wind gusted sharply, banging a loose shutter somewhere at the front of the house. Rain began to pelt down with open-faucet suddenness.

"Listen to that," Tanner said. "Sounds like we're in for a big blow, this time."

"What did you lie about?"

"Well, let's see. For starters, about how I came to be in the water tonight. My bugeye ketch didn't sink in the squall. No, *Wanderer*'s tied up at a dock in Charlotte Amalie."

She sat stiffly, waiting.

"Boat I was on didn't sink either," Tanner said. "At least as far as I know it didn't. I jumped overboard. Not long after the squall hit us."

There was still nothing for her to say.

"If I hadn't gone overboard, the two guys I was with would've shot me dead. They tried to shoot me in the water but the ketch was

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pitching like crazy and they couldn't see me in the dark and the rain. I guess they figured I'd drown even with a life jacket on. Or the sharks or barracuda would get me."

Still nothing.

"We had a disagreement over money. That's what most things come down to these days—money. They thought I cheated them out of twenty thousand dollars down in Jamaica, and they were right, I did. They both put guns on me before I could do anything and I thought I was a dead man. The squall saved my bacon. Big swell almost broached us, knocked us all off our feet. I managed to scramble up the companionway and go over the side before they recovered."

The hard beat of the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Momentary lull: the full brunt of the storm was minutes away yet.

"I'm not a single-hander," he said, "not a sea tramp. That's another thing I lied about. Ask me what it is I really am, Shea. Ask me how I make my living."

"I don't have to ask."

"No? Think you know?"

"Smuggling. You're a smuggler."

"That's right. Smart lady."

"Drugs, I suppose."

"Drugs, weapons, liquor, the wretched poor yearning to breathe free without benefit of a green card. You name it, I've handled it. Hell, smuggling's a tradition in these waters. Men have been doing it for three hundred years, since the days of the Spanish Main." He laughed. "A modern freebooter, that's what I am. Tanner the Pirate. Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Why not? Don't you find it interesting?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll give it to you straight. I've got a problem—a big problem. I jumped off that ketch tonight with one thing besides the clothes on my back, and it wasn't money." He pulled the waterproof belt to him, unsnapped the pouch that bulged, and showed her what was inside. "Just this."

Her gaze registered the weapon—automatic, large caliber, lightweight frame—and slid away. She was not surprised; she had known there was a gun in the pouch when it made the thunking sound.

Tanner set it on the table within easy reach. "My two partners got my share of a hundred thousand from the Jamaica run. I might

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be able to get it back from them and I might not; they're a couple of hard cases and I'm not sure it's worth the risk. But I can't do anything until I quit this island. And I can't leave the usual ways because my money and my passport are both on that damn ketch. You see my dilemma, Shea?"

"I see it."

"Sure you do. You're a smart lady, like I said. What else do you see? The solution?"

She shook her head.

"Well, I've got a dandy." The predatory grin again. "You know, this really is turning into my lucky night. I couldn't have washed up in a better spot if I'd planned it. John Clifford's house, John Clifford's smart and pretty wife. And not far away, John Clifford's little sloop, the *Carib Princess.*"

The rain came again, wind-driven with enough force to rattle the windows. Spray blew in through the screens behind the open jalousies. Shea made no move to get up and close the glass. Tanner didn't even seem to notice the moisture.

"Here's what we're going to do," he said. "At dawn we'll drive in to the harbor. You do have a car here? Sure you do; he wouldn't leave you isolated without wheels. Once we get there we go on-board the sloop and you take her out. If anybody you know sees us and says anything, you tell them I'm a friend or relative and John said it was okay for us to go for a sail without him."

She asked dully, "Then what?"

"Once we're out to sea? I'm not going to kill you and dump your body overboard, if that's worrying you. The only thing that's going to happen is we sail the *Carib Princess* across the Stream to Florida. A little place I know on the west coast up near Pavilion Key where you can sneak a boat in at night and keep her hidden for as long as you need to."

"And then?"

"Then I call your husband and we do some business. How much do you think he'll pay to get his wife and his sloop back safe and sound? Five hundred thousand? As much as a million?"

"My God," she said. "You're crazy."

"Like a fox."

"You couldn't get away with it. You *can't.*"

"I figure I can. You think he won't pay because the marriage is on the rocks? You're wrong, Shea. He'll pay, all right. He's the kind that can't stand losing anything that belongs to him, wife or boat,

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and sure as hell not both at once. Plus he's had enough bad publicity; ignoring a ransom demand would hurt his image and his business and I'll make damned sure he knows it."

She shook her head again—a limp, rag-doll wobbling, as if it were coming loose from the stem of her neck.

"Don't look so miserable," Tanner said cheerfully. "I'm not such a bad guy when you get to know me, and there'll be plenty of time for us to get acquainted. And when old John pays off, I'll leave you with the sloop and you can sail her back to Miami. Okay? Give you my word on that."

He was lying: his word was worthless. He'd told her his name, the name of his ketch and where it was berthed; he wouldn't leave her alive to identify him. Not on the Florida coast. Not even here.

Automatically Shea picked up her mug, tilted it to her mouth. Dregs. Empty. She pushed back her chair, crossed to the counter, and poured the mug full again. Tanner sat relaxed, smiling, pleased with himself. The rising steam from the coffee formed a screen between them, so that she saw him as blurred, distorted. Not quite human, the way he had first seemed to her when he came out of the sea earlier.

Jumbee, she thought. Smiling evil.

The gale outside flung sheets of water at the house. The loose shutter chattered like a jackhammer until the wind slackened again.

Tanner said, "Going to be a long wet night." He made a noisy yawning sound. "Where do you sleep, Shea?"

The question sent a spasm through her body.

"Your bedroom—where is it?"

Oh God. "Why?"

"I told you, it's going to be a long night. And I'm tired and my foot hurts and I want to lie down. But I don't want to lie down alone. We might as well start getting to know each other the best way there is."

No, she thought. No, no, no.

"Well, Shea? Lead the way."

No, she thought again. But her legs worked as if with a will of their own, carried her back to the table. Tanner sat forward as she drew abreast of him, started to lift himself out of the chair.

She pivoted and threw the mug of hot coffee into his face.

She hadn't planned to do it, acted without thinking; it was almost as much of a surprise to her as it was to him. He yelled and pawed

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at his eyes, his body jerking so violently that both he and the chair toppled over sideways. Shea swept the automatic off the table and backed away with it extended at arm's length.

Tanner kicked the chair away and scrambled unsteadily to his feet. Bright red splotches stained his cheeks where the coffee had scalded him; his eyes were murderous. He took a step toward her, stopped when he realized she was pointing his own weapon at him. She watched him struggle to regain control of himself and the situation.

"You shouldn't have done that, Shea."

"Stay where you are."

"That gun isn't loaded."

"It's loaded. I know guns too."

"You won't shoot me." He took another step.

"I will. Don't come any closer."

"No you won't. You're not the type. I can pull the trigger on a person real easy. Have, more than once." Another step. "But not you. You don't have what it takes."

"Please don't make me shoot you. Please, please don't."

"See? You won't do it because you can't."

"Please."

"You won't shoot me, Shea."

On another night, any other night, he would have been right. But on this night—

He lunged at her.

And she shot him.

The impact of the high-caliber bullet brought him up short, as if he had walked into an invisible wall. A look of astonishment spread over his face. He took one last convulsive step before his hands came up to clutch at his chest and his knees buckled.

Shea didn't see him fall; she turned away. And the hue and the cry of the storm kept her from hearing him hit the floor. When she looked again, after several seconds, he lay face down and unmoving on the tiles. She did not have to go any closer to tell that he was dead.

There was a hollow queasiness in her stomach. Otherwise she felt nothing. She turned again, and there was a blank space of time, and then she found herself sitting on one of the chairs in the living room. She would have wept then but she had no tears. She had cried herself dry on the terrace.

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After a while she became aware that she still gripped Tanner's automatic. She set it down on an end table; hesitated, then picked it up again. The numbness was finally leaving her mind, a swift release that brought her thoughts into sharpening focus. When the wind and rain lulled again she stood, walked slowly down the hall to her bedroom. She steeled herself as she opened the door and turned on the lights.

From where he lay sprawled across the bed, John's sightless eyes stared up at her. The stain of blood on his bare chest, drying now, gleamed darkly in the lamp glow.

Wild night, mad night.

She hadn't been through hell just once, she'd been through it twice. First in here and then in the kitchen.

But she hadn't shot John. She hadn't. He'd come home at nine, already drunk, and tried to make love to her, and when she denied him he'd slapped her, kept slapping her. After three long hellish years she couldn't take it anymore, not anymore. She'd managed to get the revolver out of her nightstand drawer . . . not to shoot him, just as a threat to make him leave her alone. But he'd lunged at her, in almost the same way Tanner had, and they'd struggled, and the gun had gone off. And John Clifford was dead.

She had started to call the police. Hadn't because she knew they would not believe it was an accident. John was well liked and highly respected on Salt Cay; his public image was untarnished and no one, not even his close friends, believed his second wife's divorce claim or that he could ever mistreat anyone. She had never really been accepted here—some of the cattier rich women thought she was a gold digger—and she had no friends of her own in whom she could confide. John had seen to that. There were no marks on her body to prove it, either; he'd always been very careful not to leave marks.

The island police would surely have claimed she'd killed him in cold blood. She'd have been arrested and tried and convicted and put in a prison much worse than the one in which she had lived the past three years. The prospect of that was unbearable. It was what had driven her out onto the terrace, to sit and think about the undertow at Windflaw Point. The sea, in those moments, had seemed her only way out.

Now there was another way.

Her revolver lay on the floor where it had fallen. John had given it to her when they were first married, because he was away so

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much; and he had taught her how to use it. It was one of three handguns he'd bought illegally in Miami.

Shea bent to pick it up. With a corner of the bedsheet she wiped the grip carefully, then did the same to Tanner's automatic. That gun too, she was certain, would not be registered anywhere.

Wearily she put the automatic in John's hand, closing his fingers around it. Then she retreated to the kitchen and knelt to place the revolver in Tanner's hand. The first-aid kit was still on the table; she would use it once more, when she finished talking to the chief constable in Merrywing.

We tried to help Tanner, John and I, she would tell him. And he repaid our kindness by attempting to rob us at gunpoint. John told him we kept money in our bedroom; he took the gun out of the nightstand before I could stop him. They shot each other. John died instantly, but Tanner didn't believe his wound was as serious as it was. He made me bandage it and then kept me in the kitchen, threatening to kill me too. I managed to catch him off guard and throw coffee in his face. When he tried to come after me the strain aggravated his wound and he collapsed and died.

If this were Miami, or one of the larger Caribbean islands, she could not hope to get away with such a story. But here the native constabulary was unsophisticated and inexperienced because there was so little crime on Salt Cay. They were much more likely to overlook the fact that John had been shot two and a half hours before Harry Tanner. Much more likely, too, to credit a double homicide involving a stranger, particularly when they investigated Tanner's background, than the accidental shooting of a respected resident who had been abusing his wife. Yes, she might just get away with it. If there was any justice left for her in this world, she would—and one day she'd leave Salt Cay a free woman again.

Out of the depths, she thought as she picked up the phone. Out of the depths. . . .

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. Vol. 104, No. 3, Whole No. 632, September 1994. Published every 28 days which includes special issues in March and October by Dell Magazines, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, at $2.50 a copy in the U.S.A., $3.25 in Canada. 1 year subscription $34.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $44.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1540 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10036. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649.

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POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN: 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send $3.50 to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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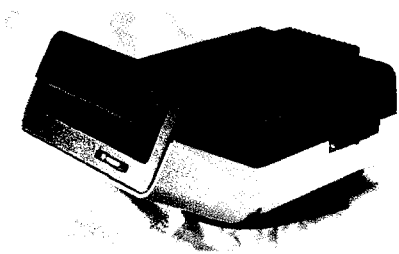

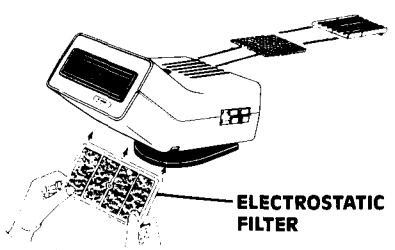

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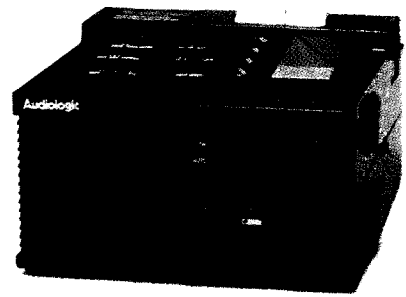

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